

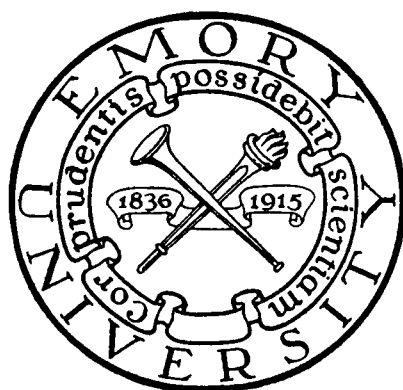
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LORD LYNN'S WIFE



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LORD LYNN'S WIFE.

A Novel.



LONDON:
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LORD LYNN'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THRUST AND PARRY.

SHE stood at the open window of her favourite room, the room on the first floor, with the pretty pale blue hangings and the western aspect, which all the old servants called Miss Darcy's Room. She stood a little back from the window, gazing out upon the Park. The American creepers, just then so rich in their luxuriance of crimson leaf and flame-hued blossom, had been trained like network across the casement, and made a flowery screen before Aurelia Darcy. A beautiful young woman, there was no denying that. Every movement of her stately form was full of a natural majesty that an empress might have envied. Her features were regular, without being insipid, grand in their classic calm, and in the rich purity of the complexion. The only fault that female critics could find with Miss Darcy's looks was, that her grey eyes were cold and inexpressive, and her hair of that peculiarly colourless hue so rarely seen, but which often indicates a self-concentrated disposition. She was beautiful, however, in her own statuesque style of beauty—a young Juno, not twenty-one for some months yet to come.

The Park that spreads around Beechborough—the Park upon which the western windows of Mr. Darcy's house looked, and from one of which his daughter was gazing—was by no means one of the first in beauty among those ancestral demesnes so plentiful in Warwickshire. It was of large extent; prettily diversified with hill and dale, brook and lily-leaved pond, and the turf and fern were of the best. Deer dappled the slopes, rabbits tippited across the sandy banks, and the oak palings that skirted the whole pleasance were equal to those at Knockholt or Longleat. But there is one essential of park-scenery which cannot always be had for money, and that is timber. At Beechborough, most of the trees had been ruthlessly cut down by the late proprietor, the wild young Squire, whose deeply-mortgaged estate had come to the hammer at last; and the plantations which the manufacturer who succeeded him—Mr. Darcy's gold had sprung from cotton—the plantations which the new lord of Beechborough had formed in every likely spot, had not as yet had time to grow. Thus, except a few big sycamores and other trees, whose trunks would hardly have paid for the labour of sawing them down and carting them away, and which owed their safety to their insignificance, the Park at Beechborough was scantily provided with shade and foliage.

But Aurelia Darcy was not looking at the greensward; nor at the rabbits frisking in and out of the fern; nor at the herd gathered, with tossing antlers that showed picturesquely against the sky, on the distant upland; nor at the scattered deer browsing among the sycamores and horse-chesnuts. She was watching a party of equestrians, riding, all unconscious of the scrutiny, along the public road that crossed the Park, and whose voices and laughter floated up on the soft autumn breeze, and reached her where she stood. The party was such a one as might have been

seen, on that fine September day, in many and many a green lane and shady road throughout broad merry England. Three children—two boys and a girl—laughing and chattering at the top of their fresh young voices, and eager to race their shaggy ponies over every stretch of tempting turf; a lady and gentleman riding side by side, and a groom bringing up the rear. Nothing could be more common-place. And even when they come nearer, and we perceive that the lady is young and pretty, a bright, honest-eyed English girl, with the tint of a blush-rose on her soft cheek, and that the cavalier at her bridle-rein is a handsome soldierly young man, with a sort of knightly bearing not often to be met with, there still seems no reason for the intense fixity of Aurelia Darcy's gaze as she watches them.

That they were no strangers to her, was plain enough. Idle curiosity, even in the dullest of dull scenes, does not prompt such intent keenness of observation as that which Miss Darcy devoted to every gesture, every movement of those in the Park beneath. That she did not desire to be seen by them, was also plain, for she had drawn back from the window, and had taken up her post of espial where the creeping plants were thickest, and blended most with the dark ivy beyond. But Lavater himself might in vain have striven to learn from her face what thoughts were in her heart, or whether this minute scrutiny were of friendly import to its objects. There was no flush and no frown, but there was no smile on the lips, and the eyes were as they always were—cold, inscrutable eyes, in which neither man nor woman could read emotion of any sort. Yet emotion of some sort Miss Darcy must have felt, as she watched the riders down the winding road; for her right hand was clenched so firmly that the nails almost buried themselves in the flesh; and those who knew Aurelia best

could have told, by the very fact that her noble form was drawn up to its fullest height, as if in defiance, that she was deeply moved. "Not yet, Lucy Mainwaring, not yet! The game is not quite won yet!" The words were spoken gently, and in a low sweet voice, like the coo of a dove. One of Aurelia's greatest charms was her voice, so flexible, rich, and clear, and her singing was worthy of the lavish praises it received. But it was also one of Miss Darcy's peculiarities, that in anger or excitement she did not raise her voice to a loud wrathful key, as other women did; on the contrary, her tones were never so soft, never so musical in their honeyed gentleness, as when she was roused to passion of any kind.

"He wears mourning still," she murmured, after a pause; "and yet the old lord has been dead—how long?" And she listlessly opened the hand she had clenched, as if to count the months on the white fingers. In the next moment she started, for she saw that the gentleman alluded to had taken leave of his fair companion, wheeled his horse round, and was cantering towards the Hall, while the groom came up at a trot to ride closer to his young mistress. The cavalier took off his hat with a sort of sportive deference as he said good-by, and the September sunlight glinted on his auburn curls, and tawny moustache, and sunburnt, manly face, as he turned laughingly away. Then he touched his strong bay horse with the spur, and cantered briskly towards the grey walls and steep red gables of the Elizabethan Hall.

"Yes, he is coming here," said Aurelia Darcy, in the same low murmuring voice—"to see *me*, or to see papa? Absurd!" And she lifted her shapely shoulders with a quick brusque movement, more expressive than words, and which told of French companionship and example early in life, when habits take root most easily. She threw a rapid

involuntary glance at the glass over the chimney-piece; the result of the glance must have been satisfactory, for a faint smile brightened the calm of her fair solemn face, but it instantly vanished, as a tap at the door was followed by the respectful entry of Jennings, Miss Darcy's own maid. The own maid was the only servant who cared to intrude on Aurelia in that pretty room with the blue hangings, next door to her bed-chamber, and where she wrote, and read, and sketched in solitude. It was an understood thing that Miss Darcy, in the blue morning room, was "not at home" for all social purposes; and yet Jennings came now to bring her a card—a visitor's card—by no means highly glazed, and neither lithographed nor printed, but simply written.

"The lady is so very desirous to see you, madam," said Jennings diffidently—all the Beechborough domestics addressed Aurelia as madam, and were as timidly respectful in her presence as if she had been a middle-aged duchess, instead of a girl of twenty—"so very desirous to see you, that—that——"

Now, the truth was that Jennings had received half a sovereign along with the card, and that, being a conscientious person in her way, she was doing her best for the donor, small as the chance was that Aurelia would deviate from her habits for a stranger in a turned gown and dusty shoes, who had evidently walked up from the village; but already Aurelia had taken the card, and read the name thereon, inscribed in a quaint stiff hand: "MISS CRAWSE." Jennings had sharp eyes, and was especially curious as to whatever concerned her mistress; but if she fancied that Miss Darcy's face grew a shade paler, at any rate the sharp ears that matched the eyes could detect no tremor in the clear voice that said, after a moment's delay: "Crawse—Crawse! to be sure! Where is the lady?" Jennings said

something about the pink drawing-room. "I will come down; or, stay; beg her to be so good as to come to me here; that will be best." And Jennings withdrew, while Aurelia stood, cold and stern, waiting. The maid soon returned, ushering in a lively little personage, whose affectionate joy at the sight of Miss Darcy must have been uncontrollable, since she sprang forward with both hands extended, exclaiming: "Dear, dearest Miss Darcy, how very glad I am!" and seemed as though she would have hugged Aurelia *avec effusion*, according to the French phrase.

But Miss Crawse's enthusiasm died away, nipped in the bud by the quiet frigidity of her reception; not that Aurelia's manner was patently cold or hostile—far from it. She had advanced a step or two to meet the visitor; she had taken one, at all events, of Miss Crawse's proffered hands, and she had uttered a few words of well-bred welcome, smiling graciously as she uttered them. But all this repose and self-command exercised a repellent effect upon the new-comer; and her boisterous greeting was subdued into a quieter tone by the time that Jennings had closed the door, and the two ladies were sitting opposite to one another in amicable converse. A more marked contrast than those two afforded could hardly have been found in the Christendom of that year, A.D. 1859.

Indeed, Miss Crawse was a short, square-built little person, with crisp black hair, long Chinese eyes, very black and very sly, and a dusky complexion, that might have belonged to a Portuguese. She was about five years older than Aurelia, and, if there be truth in phrenology, was far beneath her in intellect; but she was shrewd, low as was the space between her strong eyebrows and the roots of the coal-black hair that peeped out from an unfashionable bonnet; and she was tenacious, if a square lower jaw means anything. Shabby she certainly was; and her dusty walk-

ing-shoes, and frayed silks, and soiled gloves, contrasted as much with Aurelia's delicate muslins, pale blue and white, as her swarthy skin and low stature did with the magnificent proportions and tint of creamy marble, with just a tinge of warmer colour beneath, that confronted her. So they sat and so they smiled upon each other, as old friends should when meeting after a long separation.

"I am very glad to see you again, Miss Darcy—I suppose I must not call you Aurelia now. Have you forgotten that you used to let me call you Aurelia, in the days of auld lang syne?" said the guest.

The heiress of Beechborough Hall made no direct answer to this appeal.

"I am glad to have been at home when you were so kind as to come and see me. Have you been long in England?" was what Aurelia did say, with a pleasant inflection in her voice; and then there was a pause, for Miss Crawse, too, did not care, it seemed, to answer the query conveyed in the last part of Aurelia's speech. These two differed in all things, but in nothing more than in their way of smiling; for whereas Miss Crawse showed her strong white teeth very freely, but with something of a sneer, Aurelia's face was transformed from winter to summer; unexpected dimples that lurked near her handsome mouth, came out as if to sun themselves in the smiles that beamed upon her lips. But this warmth and glow was confined to the lower part of Aurelia's face; her grey eyes never laughed, never sparkled, when her mood was gayest; and Miss Crawse, knowing this of old, looked up at the cold eyes that gave the lie to the rest of their owner's fair features, and, bold as she was, a sort of shiver ran through her, as she tried to plumb the fathomless nature before her. But she soon rallied her courage, and rattled on:

"Dear me, dear me, how like old times, Miss Darcy, to

be sitting here, we two together, as when we used to call each other by our christian names, Lydia and Aurelia, you recollect, and tell each other all our secrets, as girls will. Heigh-ho ! those were happy days ; but of course I know very well that I can't expect to be your friend now, as I was then. I am two years and eight months older than when we parted in Ireland, and I know the difference between our positions much better than I did then ; though, to be sure, I was but a poor hired companion, and you a rich young lady, with titled relations, and it was only your kind condescension that ever made us intimates."

"I shall be very glad to be your friend still. I have always thought kindly of you, I assure you, and shall always feel really pleased to hear that you are well and happy. Have you left Rathglas——" said Aurelia, sweetly ; but Miss Crawse, whose native spirit had been gradually recovering from the first awe which Aurelia's superior breeding had impressed on her in her own despite, answered the question without waiting for its close.

"For good ? Yes, I have resigned my duties and my salary, such as they were, three months since. I was tired of Ireland, tired of Ulster, tired of Rathglas Priory, and trebly tired, excuse my rudeness, of my Lady Harriet. She's a good old woman, I know, and she's your aunt, I know, and I've a regard for her ; but she wore out my patience at last with her letters, and her wearisome piquet, and those dreary sermons of her brother-in-law, Dean Ogle. You remember how she made me read them out to her, in a sing-song voice, every Sunday evening. Yes, I've come home to England, and I'm staying at my Uncle Killick's, at Patcham Cross Roads, seven miles off."

"I know Patcham Cross Roads, and I think I have seen Mr. Killick," said Aurelia, calmly. "I am glad you are so near. But I am afraid you will find Warwickshire as dull as Rathglas."

The visitor drummed on the floor with her foot, and moved uneasily in her chair, and it was evident that she had no slight trouble to restrain some rebellious words that rose to her lips, and that Aurelia's placidity chafed her. A well-bred woman, if she be not a coward, has a tremendous advantage over one who is not well bred, in anything like a conflict of wits; and such a conflict, albeit the wordy fencing was amicably conducted, was now going on in the pretty room with the blue hangings. It was Miss Crawse's turn to speak.

"Dull? It *is* a little dull," she said, with a short fierce laugh; "but it's such a treat to me, you know, to be my own mistress, after four years of that genteel slavery at the Priory. Better be a housemaid, and black the grates, than a companion. But I shall not stay long enough at Patcham, perhaps, to get tired of it. Then the Wests—Mr. West is our Squire—are very good natured to me. Mrs. West brought me over here to-day in her carriage, as she had a call to pay two miles off, and she will pick me up as she goes through the village. But never mind me.—You don't ask, Miss Darcy, after old friends in Ireland."

"I had so few friends there," said Aurelia, with the same imperturbable good-humour. "My aunt is well, I know, for papa had a letter from her a month ago. I did not see the letter, or I should probably have been aware that you had left Rathglas."

"O dear me, no!" snapped Miss Crawse, with very decided dissent in every feature of her face. "Lady Harriet Ogle was not likely to entertain her brother-in-law with any regrets for the loss of so humble an inmate of her house as Lydia Crawse. I was not thinking of your aunt, Miss Darcy; I was thinking of Nine Stone Bridge—Dr. Kelly's," she added, impatiently.

"Indeed. I hope Dr. Kelly is quite well. Have you been there lately?" was the cold inquiry.

Very dry was the answer, and accompanied by an angry flash of the visitor's black eyes. "The doctor is well enough; he drinks more whisky than ever, and beats that poor little wife of his, I believe; but he is an able man yet, when sober. He is more than half-sick of the job that he——"

"Hush!" interrupted Aurelia Darcy, laying her finger on her lips so suddenly, and speaking in a tone of such earnestness, foreign to her habits, that Miss Crawse was startled into silence. But Aurelia resumed, in her old manner: "I would rather talk of yourself, dear Miss Crawse, of yourself, and your own wishes and prospects, and what I can do, in my little way, to assist your plans and help you. You will always find me a true friend—always. I said so before.—And now I am sure you must be tired, and hot, and half-starved, after the drive and the walk. Come down, pray, and let me introduce you to papa. And you must stay to lunch. We shall have lunch directly, and the carriage can take you over to Patcham without troubling Mrs. West. Papa will be so glad to see you, and I think we shall find him in better spirits than usual. Lord Lynn is a favourite of his, and Lord Lynn is in the house, I know."

CHAPTER II.

A HARD BARGAIN.

THE Squire of Beechborough, as Aurelia had expected, was in the Oak Room, an apartment that was not quite a library, but in no respect resembled a drawing-room. The drawing-rooms at the Hall were little used, save on the rare occasion of a party, and Mr. Darcy preferred to sit

with his books around him and his accounts within reach. He was a large, florid, discontented man, with shining bald temples, flaxen whiskers that drooped despondently, and a mouth puckered up into the sourest of sour expressions. His spirits, as his daughter had hinted, were commonly at a very low ebb; indeed, wealth had not exactly brought happiness to George Cook Darcy, who had a right to his surname, which was his by royal letters-patent.

His former name was a short one; it was Hanks. He derived it from a hard-headed parent, Luke Hanks, who had been a factory hand, and had won his spurs, Lancashire fashion, by graduating as a rich mill-owner. Old Hanks hustled and bargained his sturdy way up the golden ladder, and the desire of his heart was in some measure gratified. His exultation, coarse as it was, was kind and fatherly. He did not care to spend much on himself, having come to affluence late in life, and having a rooted habit of looking twice at a shilling before parting with it; but his hopes all centred in his son, his dear dead Eliza's only child, the boy for whose sake he and his pale wife had pinched and screwed in the early struggling days. Few men do more for their sons than Luke Hanks did or tried to do for his, George Cook Hanks. He made the young man a partner in the mill; he stinted him in nothing, being as liberal of cheques to George as he was stingy to himself and others. He would have been pleased to see the lad blossom into a man of fashion, with yacht and hunters and expensive habits, or else to watch him ripen into a sharp man of business or a politician. In vain; there was not the stuff of a statesman, or a money-spinner, or even a prodigal, in young George. The father sighed as he admitted that his boy had nothing of his own strength of character; that he was too cautious to ruin himself, but not energetic enough to win promotion. The ex-operative

did his best to make a gentleman, after his own ideal of gentlemanhood, of his son. He married him to an earl's daughter, Lady Maud, second daughter of the Earl of Warrenton; and by his wish it was that young George assumed the name and arms of his wife's noble family. But George Darcy, *né* Hanks, even with a titled spouse, disappointed his father sadly. He tried twice to get into Parliament, and twice made a wretched *fiasco* from sheer incapacity to canvass and manœuvre; and when he did reach St. Stephen's, it was by such outrageous bribery, that he was only for six weeks a legislator under protest.

Aurelia's father fared alike in all things. Lady Maud proved a flighty, peevish woman, weak in health, but strong in caprice. She took a hatred to the flaring, stuccoed villa, with its paddock, gardens, hothouses, and four hundred Cheshire acres of Cheshire land, with which old Mr. Hanks had gifted his son on his wedding-day. That residence was too near to the Lancashire town, with its myriad smoky chimneys, where her plebeian mate was born, and whence came all sorts of horrid relations, and notably Mr. Hanks himself, to spend Sundays at Slagford Villa. So she gave her husband no peace till he went abroad, dragged him for years from spa to spa, from winter resort to winter resort, and only consented to return to England when the father, anxious that his son should close his eyes, as he said, bought him Beechborough. George came back to take his place among the county magnates of Warwickshire.

Again there was a slip between cup and lip. Very soon after the return of the self-expatriated ones, Lady Maud died; and a few months afterwards, the sickly boy, in whom centred the hopes of the family, Aurelia's only brother, died too, at Eton. This disappointment was a crowning vexation to the ambitious old grandfather, who had trusted to see George Warrenton Darcy realise the proud wishes that George Cook Darcy had failed to carry out. The

founder of the family fortunes felt he had little to live on for, after that blow, for his son was a valetudinarian, not likely to marry again, and quite unable to win a second bride from a noble stock without his father's energetic and painstaking help. And Aurelia, who must now inherit all, was a girl, and would carry the wealth of the new house to some other race, and the Darceys of Beechborough would be extinct. The old man was the next to shut his eyes on the world in which he had striven and scraped for money, and lived to think his labours thrown away; and George Darcy was left with Aurelia for sole heiress to great wealth, and sole prop of his declining age.

Now, there are few prettier or more touching sights upon earth than the tender mutual affection, and confidence, and interchange of kind offices, between a widower and his child; and certainly Mr. Darcy was fond of Aurelia, and indulged her in everything; but he was rather ashamed of his parental affection than otherwise, regarding it as a sign of weakness. The Squire, like many weak men, was terribly afraid of appearing weak. He had an uncomfortable feeling to the effect that he was managed and guided, not only by his daughter, but by his lawyer and his steward, his head-gardener, the bailiff of his home-farm, and Snaffles, his head-groom. But he made up for his practical pliability by theoretical sternness, scouted all advice, contradicted everybody, and finished by doing as his counsellors pleased. Miss Crawse, unaware of this feature of Mr. Darcy's character, was puzzled when she heard him say, after the ceremony of introduction was over, and when lunch, which was announced almost immediately, was in progress:

"A visitor? O yes, Lord Lynn came in for a moment, only for a moment, and said he hadn't time to stay to lunch. Most absurd thing to ride a dozen miles fasting, as he will have to do before he gets to Hollingsley."

"A flying visit, indeed!" said Miss Crawse, with a

sidelong glance at Aurelia's face, but she could read no trace of disappointment there, though she knew well enough that her friend had fully expected to find Lord Lynn with her father.

"Did he say anything about the cub-hunting?" asked Aurelia, in the most indifferent tone in the world.

The Squire looked up. "Yes, I was near forgetting all about it. The hounds are to meet to-morrow at Cold Harbour Gorse, and he hoped to see us there—so he said. I told him it was out of the question."

"I should like to go," said Aurelia, with her usual composure.

"Out of the question! not to be thought of! and so I gave Lord Lynn to understand. A dangerous country, full of pits and ugly grips, and brooks with rotten banks that have caused more accidents than any in Warwickshire. I particularly desire, Aurelia, that you will give up all idea of going out to-morrow," snapped the master of Beechborough.

Miss Crawse, who was averse to being left out of the conversation, here chimed in with some common-place remarks upon the dangers of hunting, and its unfitness for lady-equestrians. But the Squire turned on her as abruptly as if he had not been epitomising the dreadful adjuncts of a run from Cold Harbour Gorse.

"Dangerous, not at all! And I cannot agree with you, Miss Crawse, in thinking it an improper amusement for ladies. I like to see the hounds throw off, at any rate, and perhaps following a short distance, or cutting across from point to point under the guidance of some one who knows the country. That is what Aurelia does, and what any girl who rides tolerably, and has a steady horse, can safely do. Danger indeed!"

And so delighted did Mr. Darcy seem at having differed

radically in opinion with a new acquaintance, that when Aurelia imperturbably observed that she should like to be present at the first cub-hunt; that, if her father could not accompany her, no doubt Mrs. Flathers and the Croft girls would go with her; that Robert, the pad-groom, knew the country well; and finally, that she, Aurelia, would be very careful—her father's voice was almost a good-humoured one, as he curtly said, that she might "have her own way."

Miss Crawse expressing a strong desire to return to Patcham, lest her aunt and uncle Killick, surprised at Mrs. West's coming back without her, should be anxious on her account, Aurelia suddenly mentioned the urgent necessity of her paying certain calls in that direction. She would order the carriage round at once, and drop her dear friend at Mr. Killick's door before going on to the Blythes, and the Hardings, and old Lady Edge, all of whom must have a visit. The Squire grumbled dissent, of course; but Aurelia had her way about the calls as well as on the subject of the hunt; and, much to the discomposure of coachman and helper, the carriage had to be brought round nearly an hour before its usual time. Very soon Aurelia and Miss Crawse were bowling along towards Patcham, at such moderate speed as suited the sulky coachman and the high-stepping greys. The first mile or two was spent in dead silence. Aurelia was the first to speak.

"Lydia," she began, recurring to the use of Miss Crawse's christian name as naturally and simply as if there had been no estrangement or lapse of friendship between her companion and herself—"Lydia, suppose we understand each other at once. It may be so much pleasanter in the end, you know."

"Nothing I should like better," rejoined the black-eyed

damsel, turning her head to get a fuller view of Aurelia's face.

"What do you want me to do for you?" said Aurelia, not flinching in the least from the scrutiny, and fixing her own inscrutable eyes on the flashing ones of Miss Crawse. "You want something, of course, and very naturally. You know you have a claim on me, and I acknowledge the claim, and am willing and happy to meet your wishes, if you will tell me what I can do."

She spoke these words slowly and graciously, but very gravely, and with perfect composure. She said them without a smile. The dimples about the handsome mouth had all retired to their lurking-places, and Aurelia's lips were as firm as if they were carved out of marble. Somehow, this steady serenity seemed to cause bold, brusque Miss Crawse no trifling discomposure. She reddened, and her eyes blinked before those other eyes, so grey and cold. The thoughts in dark Lydia's mind at that moment may have run somewhat thus: "How she does carry it off. She holds her head as high, and speaks as quietly and proudly as if it were all a dream — all a dream, that which we two know of so well. And yet—one word from me, and the whole thing is at an end, and how would she look then!"

If Miss Crawse could not read Aurelia, it is probable that Aurelia could read Miss Crawse. Yet she did not immediately speak, waiting till her former friend had recovered her composure. Miss Crawse broke the silence, but awkwardly. "You know, Aurelia, dear, I always liked you, and I'm sure I helped you at the first for your own sake, and at the risk of losing my own livelihood and Lady Harriet's good word to other employers. If I want something now, as you say, it's no great harm after all. What would make us happy is but a trifle to you—no, not

money!" and she flushed a deeper red, but tossed her head angrily at the same time, as she rightly interpreted a very slight curl of Aurelia's lip—"not money. I merely want one good turn for another."

"Then if you would only tell me what I can do," said Aurelia, glancing at a milestone. The coachman was recovering his good-humour, and the horses had warmed to their work, and already nearly half the distance to Patcham was achieved. Miss Crawse's momentary anger cooled down. After all, she secretly admired Aurelia's behaviour under the circumstances—which she knew so well. Another woman, she thought, in Miss Darcy's case, would have laid siege to her sympathies with tears, and flattery, and sentimental speeches; would have fawned, and cringed, and grovelled in the self-abasement of lying pretences of affection and good will. Not so Aurelia Darcy. She neither stooped nor affected an attitude of defiance, but said, in ladylike language: "Name your price; I will pay it." For so Miss Crawse understood her.

"Look here, Miss Darcy," said that determined young person, in a dogged voice, but gazing at the hedges, at the coppiced banks, at anything but that calm pale face. "I say Miss Darcy because I can't make up my mouth, as the Irish say, to call you Aurelia now; but you may call me Lydia, and welcome. Look here. We can't beat about the bush for ever. I wouldn't ask you for anything for myself, but others are dependent on me, and it would be a burning shame if I didn't help them. I've an old mother and a deformed sister in Liverpool, as I think you may have heard me say. They are poor, and what I could spare out of my salary was a comfort to them; but I've no salary now. Can you get me a situation—not as companion, thank you, any more, but as lady-housekeeper?"

"I think so. I will try. I have very little doubt of success," said Aurelia, with a little sigh, as if of relief.

But Miss Crawse had other requirements. She went on: "I have two brothers. One of them, a fine lad, is in the navy, in the paymaster's department, as a mere clerk on board ship. The other is being crammed for the Civil Service examinations. He's a good boy, but not very clever, and a desk in a public office is good enough for him. I want Tom made assistant-paymaster, and on full-pay. I want a nomination for Willie as soon as he passes. Will you get me these from your grand friends?"

Aurelia shook her head gently. "You overrate my influence," said she. Miss Crawse frowned. Aurelia resumed as quietly as before: "A girl can do so little," said she. "If I were married, and well married, I think I could manage what you wish. And I don't ask much delay—only a little grace at your hands. I have every reason to believe that Lord Lynn—this is a secret, if you please—that Lord Lynn will propose himself as a suitor before many weeks go by."

Miss Crawse nodded. "A little bird told me as much," she said; "but I heard much the same about his cousin, Miss Mainwaring. However, I'll wait a reasonable time. I mean you no injury, but I must and will have my brothers pushed on in life."

Not a word more was said till they reached Patcham Cross Roads, and the carriage drew up before the twelve-roomed red brick house, on whose door was the brass plate of Mr. Killick, Surgeon and Apothecary. Aurelia took a kind leave of her friend, and bade the coachman drive to Blythe Park. But when the carriage had gone about a mile she pulled the check-string sharply, and said, in a more abrupt tone than usual: "Home, and drive fast."

CHAPTER III.

A CUB-HUNT.

"SLACKEN that curb-chain, Thomas, do you hear? two links at least. The brute's in a lather already with just coming round from the stable-yard to the front of the house. I declare I've half a mind to have him unsaddled again, the fidgety beast!" said Squire Mainwaring, as he stood, hunting-whip in hand, on the white stone steps in front of his broad hall-door, shouting out directions to the men who were bringing round the three ponies, Miss Mainwaring's bay mare, and the Squire's big brown horse with the white stockings. Mr. Mainwaring was a true Squire; not by any means so rich as his neighbour, George Darcy, but born and bred among country-folks, and understanding their ways perfectly well. His sires before him had owned Stoke, with its grey house and spreading oaks, certainly not since the Conquest, but for a reasonable time—some three or four centuries. They had been respected and loved in their day, and so was the present master of Stoke, who was a good landlord and a kindly man; a large-bodied, honest-hearted gentleman, who was wretched when in London, wretched when abroad, wretched everywhere but on his own estate, where he knew every rood of ground and every human creature.

"He's only a little fresh, sir, just coming out of the stable," observed Thomas, as, with much trouble and coaxing, he got the pony's pretty head, all flecked with foam that flew from the champed bit, into the proper position, and was able to loosen the tight curb—"only a little fresh. Miss Kate can manage him, I'm certain."

Out came the Miss Kate alluded to, a sprightly, hazel-eyed romp of thirteen, and ran down the steps as quickly as

her long habit-skirt would let her. The pony was her pet, used to her visits in the stable, and accustomed to eat apples and bread and sugar from the girl's hand ; and she soon managed, by patting and soft words, to reduce him to obedience and good temper. The Squire still looked doubtfully at the fiery little brown nag which he had bought early in the summer for his daughter's riding. But Kitty was his favourite child, perhaps because she teased him most, and he had not the heart to balk her of the day's promised pleasure.

They rode off, then, along the lanes, where the yellowing leaves and sere grass told of autumn ; where the red haws peeped forth from the green brier ; and where the blackberries on the tangled brambles were crimson, or purple, or jetty, according as they faced the sun during the mellow September afternoons. First went the boys, ambling merrily along, and compelled to exercise much self-control that they might arrive at the meet with their steeds in good condition, as sportsmen should ; for they and their father and sisters were bound to the cub-hunt, at which Aurelia, too, had declared her intention of being present. It was the first of the season, and Mr. Mainwaring was glad of the chance of shaking his old friend the Master by the hand, and had much to tell and learn respecting the young hounds of that season's entry, the three litters of young foxes on his own property, and the fine dog-fox so unfairly trapped at Minching Farm.

First went the boys ; and the Squire lingered behind, conversing on weighty bucolic matters with his bailiff, Hutch, who strode along beside his employer's horse, talking earnestly about the cattle bound for Warwick market. So Lucy and her younger sister rode together. Katherine was a giddy little thing, and her tongue was seldom idle, and on this occasion she chose to let it run almost entirely on her sister's affairs and prospects.

"Don't tell me," said the little maid in her most provoking manner, "don't tell me that Cousin Hastings comes over to Stoke just to see papa, and talk stupid politics; not a bit likely, I am sure. He hardly ever used to come near us when he was at home long ago, and I was in the nursery, and you were all day in the schoolroom with that dreadful old Miss Mann and the tiresome old globes. Didn't you hate the globes worst of all, Lucy? But I say, dear, when you are married, won't you give us lots of nice balls at Hollingsley, and have the house full of company, and ask me over to stay for ever so long, and make such a capital croquet-ground on the lawn, and have such fun? Hastings will let you do just what you like, I'm sure."

"Nonsense, Kitty dear," said Lucy, colouring, and vexed with herself for doing so at the mention of that name so often in her thoughts, and so seldom on her lips. "Mind what you are doing with that whip, Kate. Nick is dreadfully fidgety to-day, and it is not safe to make him rear and jump as you do."

But Kate's heart was void of fear. She rather enjoyed her pony's skittishness, and to tease her elder sister was the whim of the moment; so she went on tormenting Lucy on the score of their cousin—Mrs. Mainwaring had been an Honourable Miss Wyvil—their cousin Hastings, now Lord Lynn in the peerage of England, until Lucy, almost angry, insisted that no further word should be said upon the subject.

"I am vexed and hurt, Kate, that you should speak in this manner about Lord Lynn and myself. Pray be silent; I will not hear one more word," said the elder of Mr. Mainwaring's daughters; and the reproof was a singularly austere one to come from sweet-tempered Lucy, who spoiled her younger brothers and sisters, as her parents declared, by giving way to their fancies in everything. But Lucy was serious in what she said. The subject of her

cousin's presumed attachment to herself, which to flighty young Kate seemed a mere subject for jesting or castle-building, was one on which she could not endure to listen to flippant remarks. Ever since she had known Hastings Wyvil, Captain and Lieutenant-Colonel in Her Majesty's Foot Guards, she had learned to think him something better and brighter than the untravelled young squirearchy of the county. Then he came home from the Crimea, wounded, and with high praise for his gallant conduct, and nobody admired him as Lucy did, young as she was; and before his wound was well healed, he was back in the trenches, at the work of war again; and when the war was over, he travelled far and wide.

Colonel Hastings Wyvil was vaguely heard of as living under tents in the deserts of Arabia and Persia, as shooting bisons on the prairies of North America, as very far up the Nile, and as very far north of everything except Laps, reindeer, and wild strawberries. But he did not come to the neighbourhood of Stoke again till he came in attendance on his father's coffin, and, as chief mourner and sole heir, laid the old man to rest among the bones of bygone Wyvils, in Hollingsley chancel. Old Lord Lynn had died abroad, and Hastings's mother and sisters still resided, and meant to reside, away from England. For several years the dowager had never set foot in her stately home of Hollingsley Court, nor ever ventured nearer to our foggy climate than Vevay or Como. She could not breathe out of Italy in winter, or so she said; and her husband, much older than herself, had consented to spend the last part of his life south of the Alps, and had only come home to be buried among his own people. Then Hastings had perforce been sent for; and during the long months that he spent in Warwickshire after his father's death, and the consequent pressure of business, he had seen a good deal of his cousins, the Main-

warnings, and had been much in Lucy's society. Rumour, in the county, had two tongues, one of which had already affianced the young lord to his kinswoman, Miss Mainwaring; while the other had published the banns of marriage between Lord Lynn and Aurelia, daughter of George Darcy, *né* Hanks.

Scarcely had Lucy spoken, before Mr. Mainwaring, having finished his conference with Hutch, came up at a round trot, taking out his watch as he came.

"We must get on a little, girls, to make up for lost time," said the Squire, in his deep hearty voice. "Time and tide wait for nobody, nor foxhounds either, Miss Kitty; so come along." And they pushed briskly on, in comparative silence, till they reached Cold Harbour Gorse, where the hounds were waiting, a mottled patch of moving forms, among the freshly-shorn stubbles that skirted the covert. Cold Harbour Gorse, with its eleven acres of broom and furze, verging on the thick plantations of Fuller's Wood, was reckoned a sure find. Once fairly forced out into the open, Monsieur Reynard had no shelter nearer than the main earths at Cheriton.

A cub-hunt is not a very imposing affair, nor had the sport of this September morning attracted a large concourse. The amateurs were three farmers, a horse-dealer, a doctor, who knew that he was wanted at a union work-house six miles off, and who grudged every minute's delay, two boys, under guidance of their papa's coachman, a saucy-faced, saucy-tongued knife-grinder on his donkey, bare-backed, and a dozen farm-labourers. The M.F.H. wore a dark-green coat, brown boots, and knee-caps. The huntsman and whips were in pink, certainly, but they had donned the stained old scarlets that had been classed as No. 2 of their wardrobe the year before, and which were poor substitutes for the brilliant new cloth they would put

on at the first lawn meet in the late October. Of the hounds, a good many were raw young animals, sniffing foolishly down the furrows where some belated hare had brushed the dew on her passage, and only to be kept in order by much rating and whipcord. And the horses ridden by the staff of the hunt were young horses, that were as new to the work, and as much in need of schooling as the hounds of that season's entry, horses that were on their promotion, and had to be "made" into hunters. It was like a theatre by daylight.

"Look, papa, here come a lot more people. Ever so many ladies—ain't it jolly!" cried Rowland Mainwaring, eagerly rising in his stirrups for a better view of the hats and feathers coming glancing up between the golden broom-plants and dark ash-trees.

"It's Miss Darcy on the chesnut, I know it is," chimed in Richard, the younger of the two Mainwaring boys.

Richard was right. Miss Darcy it was whose fair calm face came first into view; and her companions were the Croft girls, from Holton Rectory, one on a piebald pony, one on her father's sober Roman-nosed horse, quiet to ride and drive. Mrs. Flathers—who called herself on her cards Mrs. Major Flathers—a bony, large-featured, soft-hearted Milesian lady, on a weedy, well-bred mare, chaperoned the party; and Robert, Mr. Darcy's pad-groom, followed at a respectful distance. Mr. Darcy kept a pad-groom just as he kept up a staff of watchers for his preserves, but he never hunted, and seldom even attended a meet; nor did he much care for the couple of battues to which he invited his friends, and at which he rarely appeared with any weapon more murderous than a walking-stick. But Robert's place was not quite a sinecure; he had to open gates, widen gaps, and otherwise facilitate the progress of Miss Aurelia, who liked to follow the hounds, but was averse to risks.

Squire Mainwaring (he was so used to the rustic title that it seemed his due) turned from where he was chatting with the Master—who all the time had an eye on Ravager and Rattlepate, giving tongue, with juvenile rashness, at the mouth of a rabbit-burrow—and took off his hat to Miss Darcy and her friends; and bows and civil words of salutation passed current, but still the two parties did not coalesce. The Mainwarings knew and liked the Crofts; but they did not know Mrs. Flathers, who had lately come to live in a stuccoed house that some speculative builder had erected close to Holton, and whose husband was reported to be in India, and to be irregular in sending home remittances. And though they knew Aurelia Darcy, they did not like her much—that is, not very much.

But now the hounds went charging at the fence, and crashing through the brushwood; and presently the plantation and gorse covert were musical with shrill yelp and long-drawn whine, the falsetto notes of the young recruits mingling with the cracking of whips, the chiding or cheering accents of human voices, and the deep earnest yowl of the experienced foxhounds. Lord Lynn was late in putting in an appearance; and the Master would not have given more than five minutes' law to all the peerage combined. A hoarse scream, and the words "Gone away!" eagerly repeated from lip to lip, followed by a rush of the foot-people, and a movement on that of the horsemen, took place as Lord Lynn came cantering up; and his groom bustled forward with the fine hunter that he had been walking up and down clear of the crowd. The young man seemed to hesitate for a moment, as he returned the greeting of the Master, as to which of the two parties he should join. A glance at Aurelia, as she sat, proud and pensive, on her pretty chesnut, with its arching neck and satin skin, seemed to decide him. He hastily mounted his own horse,

and leaving the hack to the care of his groom, rode smilingly up to his cousins, shook hands with Lucy and her father, nodded good-humouredly to the rest, and was turning off toward Aurelia. But Kitty's brown pony, a hot-tempered brute, up to three times her weight, and excited by the noise and stir, had begun to swerve, and plunge, and fling, and finally refused to pass through the white plantation-gate that a plough-lad was holding open for the accommodation of the company.

"Do, pray, take care of her; pray, don't leave her!" exclaimed Lucy, a great deal more alarmed for her sister's safety than Kate herself; and as Mr. Mainwaring had cleared the low hedge at the farther end of the coppice, and was out of sight, a much less good-natured person than Lord Lynn must have stopped at that appeal. But, by the time he had got the rebellious little animal fairly through the gateway, and Kate had regained the mastery over her self-willed favourite, Aurelia, following her own friends, had vanished among the yellowing leaves of the plantation.

Presently, Mr. Mainwaring fell back from the side of the M.F.H.; and as he was there to take care of his daughters, and, moreover, as Nick was behaving well once more, Lord Lynn was able to press on towards where the hounds were in full-cry after a fine cub-fox that doubled and twisted, and went up and down the wind for short bursts of speed, always finishing by a bolt back to cover, as cub-foxes will do. Thus it befel that the chase, which had first promised well for a brisk run in the open, degenerated into a mere scramble through many acres of saplings and half-grown timber, that the field was scattered, and that Lord Lynn found himself alone, 'somewhere in Fuller's Wood, with the cry of the hounds dying away in the distance. Alone—yes; but at a hundred yards' distance, in

the grass-grown ride, across which the branches of the hazels interlaced, rich with clusters of unripe green nuts, he saw a hat and waving feather, and in a moment more he was by the side of Aurelia Darcy.

"Are you lost, too?" asked Aurelia, with her clear low laugh, turning in her saddle as she heard the beat of hoofs upon the sward. "It is really too absurd," she added. "Jane Croft's pony could not get over the ditch, coming back from that great turnip-field where the fox was headed back, so I left Robert to show her the way round by the meadows, and get her safely through the gaps; and Mrs. Flathers chose to stop too. I thought myself very wise and courageous for striking out a path for myself; and here I am, after all."

There she was, certainly, and very well she looked, to Lord Lynn's fancy—not in the least flushed or dishevelled, after all the galloping; but as calm, and statuesque, and serenely fair, as if she and her admirably-trained chesnut—one of those horses, invaluable for ladies' hunting, that never make a mistake—had *not* brushed through overhanging boughs and crackling brushwood. How coolly she took it, too, that fact of being lost. There was nothing affected or missyish about her, Lord Lynn thought.

"There—I heard the hounds again for a moment," said Aurelia, bending her stately head to listen; "perhaps, if we go to the left, we may fall in with them yet."

But when they emerged from the wood, it was upon a wild stretch of common that they found themselves, where nothing intersected the spare turf and straggling furze-clumps except the half-obliterated tracks of cart-wheels—tracks made the winter before, and more than half-filled up with grass and dead leaves. Not so much as a cheer or the yelp of a hound could be heard; the chase was out of sight and hearing; however, Lord Lynn imagined that

some distant landmarks—a mill and a group of plummy black firs close beneath it—were not unknown to him. Aurelia had no recollection of them, but she was content to take the fact of their whereabouts upon trust.

“ You must be my guide, after all,” she said, quietly ; but her rich voice was full of music, and her queenly simplicity of manner was dangerously fascinating. Lord Lynn could not restrain himself from uttering some words, high flown, but more than half serious, as to the happiness which it would be to him to be her guide always, through life, in fact ; and as the young man’s heart warmed at the sound of his own words, a direct avowal of attachment seemed trembling on his lips, when up clattered the two Mainwaring boys, very muddy, a good deal scratched by brambles, but detestably exultant and communicative, with regard to their own prowess. It was a trial, a great trial for Aurelia’s patience just then, when the best-looking bachelor in Warwickshire had been within an ace of offering her a coronet and fourteen thousand a year, to have to listen smilingly to the boasts of those boys : how Rowland’s pony had rolled over with him in three wet ditches ; how Richard’s had been down twice on ploughed land, had cleared a hurdle, and crushed through a bullfinch as black as his hat, and so forth. But though the white hand in the pretty gauntlet was clenched upon the gold-mounted whip, Aurelia behaved beautifully, and betrayed no vexation in look or tone.

Then up came Robert the groom on his foaming horse, having ridden hard and boldly in search of his young mistress ; and as Robert knew the country well, he pointed out the right way, and the cavalcade left the common by a deep lane between glistening holly-hedges. Aurelia rode beside Lord Lynn, but they did not talk much ; the broken thread of their late conversation was not one easy to piece

together, as matters stood. The boys hung back, bragging to Robert of the perils they had faced; and their loud voices and laughter, with the tramp of the horses, reached the ears of a wayworn, poorly-clad traveller, who lay resting half asleep among the brown fern of the bank. The traveller scrambled up the bank and crouched there, hidden by the tangled growth above; and Aurelia did not see the pale haggard face—a face to haunt a sleeper's dreams—that watched her as she rode past, stealthily, but with something of a wild-beast fury in the eyes. But nobody saw the face, and Aurelia rode on, with a heart that beat somewhat quicker than usual, by Lord Lynn's side. When they got to Kinghorn Bridge, where two roads meet, they found a group of riderless horses, and a number of persons on foot and horseback, collected round the blacksmith's forge.

“An accident has happened to one of the young ladies out with the hounds to-day,” said a farmer in answer to Lord Lynn; “one of Squire Mainwaring's daughters, I believe it is, that was thrown. Anyhow, they've gone for the doctor, and she's lying on the bed inside here, very badly hurt indeed.”

CHAPTER IV

A HAPPY HIT.

It was poor Kitty Mainwaring. She had been thrown at last by her four-footed pet, Nick; indeed, the vicious pony had reared madly up against the curb, and fallen back upon her. It was a mercy, people said, that she was not killed; but she was much hurt, and they did not know how much, for there was no surgeon at hand. Mr. Barker had started

for his appointment at the workhouse long ago, and a whipper-in had been sent to try and overtake him; another rider had gone off at speed to Patcham Cross Roads for Mr. Killick. So there Kitty lay, in the bed in the room up-stairs, with her muddy and torn habit streaming across the patchwork counterpane, and her loosened hair flowing dark over the white pillow, and her poor little hat all crushed and broken, still hanging by a tress of hair. She had been faint at first, and was in much pain now, but she bore it with that quiet courage of passive endurance, in which girls often surpass their brothers. Her big, soft-hearted father was half distracted; he was one of those men whose very pity for a loved sufferer seems to unnerve them, and he stood beside the bed with one of Kate's little hands between his own muscular ones, his grief and alarm bursting out now and then into a sob, such as only a strong man in sorrow can give, and such as is more impressive than the loudest wailing. The Squire blamed himself. He ought to have known better than to have let Kate ride that dangerous brute; it was all his fault. If she died—if Kitty died—he should have murdered his child, so he felt; and how could he face her mother—he should never hold up his head again. What could he do? What could he do? Would those doctors never come! He would go himself; but he could not leave Kitty.

The Squire, though a fond father, was a bad nurse, but Lucy was tender and helpful too. It was Lucy who had sprung from her own horse without help, for the first time in her life, and, with total disregard of danger, though by no means a heroine in general, had dragged Kitty clear of the frightened, floundering animal that had caused the mischief. It was on Lucy's shoulder that her sister's head had rested in the first few minutes of half-incredulous panic, while means were being sought to construct a rude hand-

litter of a hurdle strewed with branches; and it was Lucy who now bent over the poor child, tenderly washing away the blood from the shallow cut that a sharp flint had made on her left temple, and arranging the pillow under her head, and she lay with her bright little face pinched and wan with pain.

"My poor Kitty, my poor dear Kate, and I that was so harsh to you too!" said Lucy, with self-upbraidings for the unkindness with which, as she considered, she had received her thoughtless young sister's blithe talk, hours ago.

"It served me right, Lucy, and I love you," said Kitty, faintly. "Is that papa that's so sorry? Don't let him, Lucy. I don't mind it much."

But it was evident that the girl was in very great pain. "It's my shoulder—my shoulder is the worst," was all she could say, in a weak voice, as Lucy moistened her lips, and tried to get her to swallow a few drops of brandy, but could not.

Such was the sight of which Lord Lynn and Aurelia Darcy got a glimpse, through the crowded doorway. Lord Lynn was fond of his young cousin, of all his cousins, and he was much shocked, and would have ridden willingly to the world's end for help, but all assured him that Mr. Barker or Mr. Killick must soon arrive. He got little more than a glance at Lucy's face, so transfigured by pure pity and loving care, that he thought she had never before looked so beautiful. She was not beautiful generally, only pretty, a modest, honest-hearted English girl, with truthful brown eyes. But the room was cleared of most of the bystanders, at Lucy's entreaty, that Kitty might have more air. And Lord Lynn looked at Aurelia, who *was* beautiful, royally beautiful, and for a moment he doubted which of those two women would in very truth be the better wife for one who prized honour and tenderness as he did. Yet Aurelia

behaved very well—very well; she made no parade of sympathy or sorrow, or even of that impressibility which makes many of us prone to weep when others are in grief. Such a demonstration would have been out of tune with her character, and she was not likely to commit a solecism. But the few questions she asked were grave and sensible, as well as kind; and the few words of gentle regret which she uttered were spoken with an unobtrusive hopefulness that won her the good will of those around. Then she slipped away, and at the door of the forge beckoned to Robert, and said something to him in a low tone. Robert remounted, and went spurring off at a pace that would hardly have pleased Mr. Darcy, who was querulously particular about his horses.

A long time passed—really a long time when counted by minutes and hours, but an intolerable, weary time to those about the sufferer's bed. Several of the bystanders had dropped off, but curiosity had attracted others. Still, no doctor arrived.

At last there was a roll of wheels and the quick tread of a horse, and Mr. Killick came tearing up in his high gig, as fast as the big raw-boned grey could go. Almost every one was glad that he, and not his rival, Mr. Barker, was the first to reach the spot. There was hope in the very sound of his honest voice, hope in his bluff homely face; he had been a surgeon in the navy, when the navy was a rougher school than now, and he was a rugged, though a kind and a skilful healer. He flung the reins to a volunteer, jumped out, hurried up-stairs, and cleared the room of all but the two or three who had a right to be there. His report was satisfactory in its way.

“Scratch on the temple—nothing. Arm badly bruised—young flesh soon recovers that. Thumb sprained—painful, but a trifle. Shoulder—ah, you’ve let the muscles

stiffen. You didn't know it was dislocated, then? So much the worse. We shall have a strong pull and a long pull to slip the bone back into the socket. But don't be frightened, my dear. I won't hurt you, if I can help it."

The surgeon was right. Kitty's shoulder was dislocated, and the muscles had had time to become rigid, making what might have been the affair of a moment a very serious task, in which no slight force and leverage were required to overcome the resistance. It was done at last, and without one needless pang to the patient, for the ex-naval surgeon was as tender of heart as he was rough in speech. But the Squire's heart bled for the necessary pain which his daughter endured, and it was almost a relief when Kitty fainted for the second time.

"And now to get her home, as smoothly and as fast as you can. She must keep her bed for a few days, and I may as well call and see her this evening; but rest and good nursing are better for her than drugs. I'll tell the coachman to drive slowly, and to keep to the main road; the ruts in those sandy lanes would torture her, poor thing. Where's the carriage?"

Where, indeed? Mr. Killick's question only stung the Squire into blaming himself afresh for his stupidity. He had been so busy thinking of Kitty's pain and possible danger, that he had made no provision for transporting her home. Carts and gigs were out of the question; yet there was nothing on springs and four wheels within miles. More delay must ensue, while a messenger rode to Stoke; and Mrs. Mainwaring would receive an exaggerated account of the mischief done into the bargain.

As the Squire was groaning over this fresh blunder, up dashed an open barouche, and drew up at the door of the blacksmith's house. The horses were in a lather of heat and foam; the carriage, admirably built, was easily hung on

delicate springs, and it was well stored with cushions, pillows, shawls, all sorts of paraphernalia, hastily impressed into the service. The Darcy arms were on the panels. Aurelia came gliding into the room again.

"I am so glad they lost no time," she said. "James is a very careful, good coachman, and I am sure he will take great pains, now, to get poor Miss Kate home safely."

Lucy looked joyfully up. "Did you send for your own carriage—for Kitty! How good of you."

They brought the poor girl very tenderly down the stairs, and placed her in the carriage, with her head resting on Lucy's shoulder, and Lucy's patient arm round her. But before the Squire got into the carriage, he took Aurelia's hand and kissed it, and his eyes were not dry.

"God in heaven bless you; you are an angel!" said Mr. Mainwaring with all his heart, and with a conscience that smote him as he remembered that he had had but a poor opinion of this girl—so thoughtful and simply kind. The carriage drove off. Lord Lynn looked admiringly at Aurelia. She had a heart, he thought, as well as more brains than fall to the lot of most of her sex. Mrs. Flathers having resumed her chaperonship, he had little opportunity of speaking to Miss Darcy alone, but the lingering pressure of his hand, and the whispered "*Good-by, Aurelia!*" were expressive enough. He had never before called her by that name.

Aurelia's reflections, as she rode home, were pleasant ones. She had played her cards well. That was a happy hit about the carriage—a very good idea indeed.

CHAPTER V

MISS CRAWSE SEES A FACE SHE KNOWS.

"Yes, Aunt Martha; the letter was from Liverpool, from mamma. Would you like to see it?" and Miss Crawse let the linen that she was marking drop upon her knee, laid aside the pen and the indelible ink, and produced a letter from her pocket. But Mrs. Killick—for this conversation took place in the little dining-room of the surgeon's house at Patcham Cross Roads—Mrs. Killick had weak eyes, and she shook her head despondently as she glanced at the closely-written sheets of thin bluish note-paper.

"No use at all, my dear," said she, going on with her monotonous task of darning socks; "no use for me to blind myself over poor dear Susan's small criscrossed handwriting. If she wrote clear and black like you——But you can tell me just as well what she says. Does my sister scold me for not writing? And did she get the preserves all right? And how is poor Sarah?"

Miss Crawse very good-humouredly cast her eyes over the fine upstrokes and long-tailed flourishes, therefrom to cull the pith of the letter, for her aunt's behoof. She was quite a different person in that house at Patcham from the fierce little creature—half pert, half obsequious—that we have seen confronting the serene majesty of her dear friend Aurelia. Under the Killicks' roof, their niece was helpful, frank-spoken, and not by any means a disagreeable inmate. She had no reason to be either defiant or cringing with those plain honest relatives of her own, and it was not her nature to eat the bread of idleness; so she volunteered a good many small services for both aunt and uncle; and as she sat marking the linen, a child's frock, that she had just finished

hemming, lay beside her, and a little way off lay a well-thumbed Latin Grammar, out of which she had been teaching his accidence to little Edward Killick. The master of the house agreed with his wife that Lydia Crawse was a comfortable sort of visitor, brisk, cheerful, and not the less estimable because of her naturally hot temper.

"Sarah is much as usual," said Miss Crawse, skimming the cream from the wordy epistle under her eyes—"not in much pain, but very low-spirited. She has been trying some quack medicine, and fancied, at first, that it would cure her spine, poor thing; but she got rather worse than better, and mother insisted on her leaving off the remedy, whatever it was. I can't read the Greek name. The regular doctor has been called in again, and he orders her jellies and strong soup, and all sorts of nice things, as she has no appetite, poor dear; and no wonder, shut up always in that smoky, dull Bail-street." And here Miss Crawse's brow gathered into a frown, and her foot drummed on the floor with the old petulant action, for she was thinking of Aurelia and her promises, as yet, of course, unperformed.

"What does your mother say about herself—about money-matters, I mean?" asked Mrs. Killick, coughing apologetically behind the stocking. "Those boys, your brothers, must be a great anxiety to Susan."

"Yes, they are," returned Miss Crawse, rustling the paper roughly between her short fingers. "She says she has just had a letter from Tom. He's at Malta, poor boy; but they expect to come home to Plymouth or Spithead soon, and then the ship will be paid off, and Tom will be out of the service, perhaps. His best chance, he says, is to get employed in one of the dockyards; but that chance is a poor one, because so many of the youngsters have more influence than he has—parliamentary influence, he means. Willie tells the same story. He expects to be told to wait—wait,

while others pass before him. What with the rent, and the taxes, and the doctor, mamma could hardly scrape together enough for Willie's tutor. And suppose he's thrown on her hands !”

Miss Crawse's swarthy cheek was all in a glow by this time, and there was an ominous light in her Mongolian-looking eyes, for she was getting more and more doubtful of her own prudence in trusting to Aurelia's fair words. She sincerely pitied the griefs, and cordially shared the hopes and cares of her own kith and kin ; and some connexion, perhaps illogical, between Miss Darcy's serene prosperity and the narrow fortunes and pinched existence of those at home, rose up before her, and stung her temper to ebullition ; so that when Mrs. Killick, in all sincerity of commonplace condolence, expressed her regret for her elder and poorer sister's condition, mentioning, for the twentieth time, how gladly she and her husband would extend a helping-hand, were it within their power to do more than send the usual small dole at Christmas, and suggesting, as a new idea, that Miss Darcy, if solicited, might be able to procure some appointment for Lydia's brothers, that petulant young person could bear no more.

“ Help me ? Miss Darcy ! Yes, she could, if she chose. Her admirer, Lord Lynn, if he really does care about her, could set Tom on his feet in a moment. There's a Wyvil in the Admiralty, I know ; and if it's all stuff about his paying his addresses to Aurelia, which I half suspect, still one of the county members visits at Mr. Darcy's ; and much it would cost her, certainly, to put in a word for Willie or Tom. Nobody gets help but those who help themselves. We shall see by-and-by.” And Miss Crawse flounced out of the room, and came back in an incredibly short space of time arrayed in her bonnet and shawl. She was going to the village shop and post-office, she said, and then for

a walk, to clear her brains. She could think best when walking, as she always declared; and she was a great walker, and fond of exercise, and commonly executed most of the errands of the Patcham household. On this occasion, Mrs. Killick wanted nothing but a couple of skeins of darning-cotton and a paper of pins—commissions which her niece undertook with perfect readiness. Equally compliant was Miss Crawse when, as she passed the open door of the surgery, Mr. Killick called out to beg, that if she were going as far as the end of the village street, she would deliver a bottle of lotion to old Mrs. Flinn at the almshouses. “That is, if you’re not too proud to be seen carrying physic to my patients, or if the old lady’s tongue does not frighten you,” said the kindly surgeon. “She gave me a benefit of it this morning; but her rheumatism is real, and that block-head of a boy will want his dinner before he goes out again with the basket. So, if you don’t mind——”

Lydia Crawse did not mind in the least. She took the bottle, hid it under her shawl, and started. A trifling circumstance, but then the great events of life pivot on trifles. Had Mr. Killick’s boy, the usual Ganymede of medicines, been immediately available, the subsequent events of this history would, in all probability, never have occurred at all. Miss Crawse took the bottle, and trudged sturdily up the long straggling street, with its garden palings, and cottages, and smithy, and beer-houses showing their rival signs afar off.

To walk, at no demure ladylike pace, but at a brisk rate, was a relief to Lydia Crawse; her thoughts came more freely, and the exercise gave her muscles something to occupy them, and took away that irritable desire to smash crockery or maim furniture, which she, like many hot-tempered persons, felt when brooding over her cares in repose. Those cares were not wholly, or for the most part,

of a selfish character. Miss Crawse, like a wasp, was faithful to her own race, however she might be disposed to buzz and sting when abroad. She thought much more about her mother's troubles, the butcher's bill only paid in part, the grocer's bill outgrowing the meagre sums handed in on account, the arrears of rent in Bail-street, than of her own prospects. She was full of sympathy for her brothers, who confided all their youthful difficulties to her. She knew of Tom's debts on board and ashore, small liabilities, but not to be cleared off out of his petty salary save by wondrous self-denial. She had scraped together a very few pounds, that Willie might be dressed "like a gentleman" before the examiners; and to this end she had sold at the county town sundry trinkets, old keepsakes that it cost her a pang to part with. No, Miss Crawse was not selfish, in the narrowest sense of the word. She meant her family to have the first share of those good things which she was resolved that Aurelia Darcy, by fair means or foul, should provide.

"For myself," thus ran the ex-companion's half-spoken soliloquy—"for myself, I'd scorn to ask her for anything. I'd rather work my fingers to the bone than touch her money, and I'd take my chance of a situation sooner than demean myself to beg for her good word. Hers, forsooth! But I must put my pride in my pocket, for mother's sake, and Sarah's sake, and the boys'—Them she shall assist, and soon, too, or I'll know the reason why. I don't know what has happened to change her, but there is a change. She seems to freeze me into silence, somehow, though I could bite my tongue off for being so cowardly as not to speak what I have in my heart." And Miss Crawse walked on, her memory busy in painting pictures of the past.

On her mental retina rose the images of two girls, one short and dark, the other fair and majestic, walking side by

side in a glen among the wild scenery of Ulster, with the purple and black masses of the mountains rolling vast and savage to left and right. There was confidence then in the place of watchful reticence; there was no barrier of etiquette between the great heiress and the poor dependent. In that out-of-the-way nook, buried among the mountains, distinctions of rank and wealth were less forcibly marked than in the life of cities, and the advantages of age and experience were on the side of the more humbly born of that pair of friends; and yet, even then, Lydia Crawse had always been half afraid of her junior, had always felt that the cold grey eyes, and the calm young face, and the unruffled composure, were signs of a nature as much harder and more polished than her own, as the diamond is harder and brighter than granite. And now, after nearly three years of separation, she found herself less and less a match for her quondam friend, and dimly recognised the force and tenacity of purpose that lay behind so fair an exterior. To be sure, Miss Crawse had a talisman in her possession, by the aid of which, in case of need, she could exorcise even a stronger spirit than that of Aurelia; but the spell would work mischief to all concerned, without benefiting the enchanter, and it was not dark Lydia's nature to do harm gratis.

Pondering on these matters, she pushed on along the dusty street, till she reached the almshouses, and remembering her errand, knocked at the door of No. 3, and was soon in the presence of Mrs. Flinn, the most inveterate gossip in the parish. Lydia knew Mrs. Flinn well enough, the good woman being a constant patient, albeit a non-paying one, of Mr. Killick's, and she had more than once listened with a dry sense of humour to the almswoman's flow of words. Mrs. Flinn had nothing to think of but her own aching joints and the demerits of her neighbours, and

little scandal could exist in that country-side without finding its way to her greedy ears. On this occasion, however, Mrs. Flinn was suffering very sharp twinges from her old complaint, and her talk was on less general topics than usual.

"Much obliged to you, I'm sure, miss; and very kind it is of you to come out in the heat of the day for a poor old woman like myself, but I'm afraid doctor's stuff won't do me much good. I'm 'most sure of that, and so I told Dr. Killick to his face, this blessed morning. If only old Nanny could be swum now, I might get some ease for my poor aching bones, which they feel as if somebody was sawing 'em in two, with a blunt saw too, to get at the marrow. But the doctor said it would be agin the law, and if so, more shame to the law, says I."

"Old Nanny swum? What good would that do to anybody? I don't know what you mean," said Miss Crawse, wearily, for her thoughts were astray, and the woman's babble annoyed her instead of diverting her.

"Old Nanny Brown. She that lives at the turnpike on the Blanchminster-road, a lone place, three mile off and more. Her goodman was very respectable—I don't deny that—so, when he died, they let her go on keeping the bar. But she's a bad one, is Nanny. She never liked me, nor I her, when my master had the Whitehouse Farm under Squire West, before misfortunes came and left me a lone creature in this place, eating charity-bread. We were neighbours then; and she told me what a lucky woman I was to have seven such good cows in milk, just when the cattle were dying all about us. You may believe me or not, miss, but the very next week after that spiteful cat was in my yard, the cows took ill, poor Brindle first, and six died out of the seven; and that October my master fell off a ladder thatching, for he did a bit of thatch-work at odd

times, and never did much work more, but was on club-pay till he died. Last Sunday, who should look in here but old Nanny, and she asked after my rheumatics in her sneering way, and I've been racked to pieces nigh ever since; she deserves to be swum, if ever any one did deserve it."

It really appeared, on further inquiry, that Mrs. Flinn sincerely believed in the malign influence of this reputed witch over her ailments, and was as eagerly desirous to subject the sorceress to the ordeal of water as ever was mediæval peasant. Lydia Crawse chuckled inwardly. She had strong common sense, and the idea of a witch keeping a turnpike-gate tickled her fancy. She had never been superstitious; and this revelation of the darker shadows on the rustic mind—for Mrs. Flinn declared, with an accent of conviction, that she was not the only one in the parish, by many, to attribute occult powers to the supposed tormentor—amused her.

"I never went up the Blanchminster-road except in a close carriage," said she, getting up from the Windsor chair on which she had been sitting; "so I'll take my walk there, and have a peep at this wicked enchantress."

There was real concern in Mrs. Flinn's voice, as she protested against any such rash tampering with the ministers of Darkness. It was bad enough, she declared, to meet old Nanny's evil eye by chance; but to seek out one whose power of "wishing" harm to the human race was so unscrupulously exerted, was folly indeed. Nanny Brown was a foreigner, no Warwickshire-born person, but a native of some distant part of England; her sons had turned out ill, and one of them had been transported, while the other had but just come out of prison, having narrowly escaped a severer sentence for his share in the death of a gamekeeper. If half what Mrs. Flinn said were true, in short, Nicholas

Brown, sheep-stealer, poacher, rick-burner, and suspected coiner, was by no means the sort of Corydon that nervous persons might desire to meet in a solitary spot. But Miss Crawse laughed, as she said that she was not worth robbing, and that footpads, like ghosts, feared the daylight; and she kept to her purpose of walking up the Blanchminster-road.

The way from the manufacturing town of St. Sarcenets to the cathedral city of Blanchminster is rather a lonely one; and its loneliness reaches its climax about two miles beyond the guide-post of Patcham, where the rush-grown lea-land comes close down to the sharp flints of the macadamised highway, and where oozy streams creep lazy and dark through the peaty soil. Warwickshire is a county remarkable for its hedgerow timber, but here the gaunt elms, the many-limbed willows, and moss-grown ashes, seem to have grown into unusually rank and straggling vegetation, and the yellow and russet leaves hang dank over the road. There is scarcely a house to be seen. Miss Crawse was impressed, reluctant as she was, by the dreary solitude.

The day was one of those hot moist autumn days, when all nature seems to be steeped in a vapour-bath, and when the lazy mist-wreaths hang all day above the ill-drained meadows, and round the skirts of the wood, for lack of a fresh breeze to dissipate them. Good walker as Miss Crawse was, she found the oppressive atmosphere and clinging dust lengthen out the miles as she went on; and when she passed the third milestone, and saw the white turnpike-gate on the rise of a little hill, she felt as if she had taken an unnecessary amount of trouble for a trivial object.

Old Nanny's cottage turned out to be a two-storied edifice, built of the freestone found so plentifully in the county, and already honeycombed by rain and frost. The

roof was a sloping one, with wooden gables and mossy tiles. The window of the little front room—half-shop, half-parlour—displayed a couple of pickle-jars, one full of conglomerrated brandy-balls, one of a red and white saccharine substance called Albert rock, some tapes, needles, balls of string, and highly-coloured portraits of the Red Rover and Marshal Blucher. Over the upper windows grew a neglected woodbine, filling the air with sweet, sickly perfume; and among the tendrils dangled a card proclaiming “Lodgings.”

But it was not on the card that Miss Crawse's eyes, as she came softly up under shadow of the straggling quickset hedge, were fixed; they were riveted on a face—a sallown, wan face, with black hair hanging neglected about the temples, and fierce cavernous eyes glaring forth upon vacancy—that Miss Crawse saw through the open casement of one of the little upper rooms of Nanny Brown's cottage. Miss Crawse had a bold heart, but it was fairly cowed now. She bent her head, and drew down her veil by an instinctive movement. Sick and giddy, she opened the little half-door of the petty shop, tottered forward, and dropped into a chair. There was no old woman, witch or not, on the premises at that moment; it was a buxom, black-eyed lass of fourteen, Nanny's granddaughter, only living child of Nanny's eldest born, serving out his term at Bermuda, who came hurrying forward to courtesy, and express her fears that the lady was ill.

“It's nothing,” said Miss Crawse, with a gasp—“nothing. Only the heat; and I have walked too far. I should like a glass of water. Would you be so good as to get me a glass of water?”

CHAPTER VI.

A LETTER FROM IRELAND.

THE post came late to Beechborough, as to many country-houses. On the morning of that day on which Miss Crawse had walked out to the turnpike, it was later than usual; either the train was behind time, or the foot-messenger had dawdled among the alehouses and farms between the town of Stainsbury and Mr. Darcy's house. Mr. Darcy, as he sat in the Oak-room, grumbled testily at the tardiness of the walking postman. His daughter was with him. Aurelia made it a rule not to neglect her father. In character and tastes they were very wide apart; but she knew that he was fond of her, and she knew, too, that her judgment was secretly valued by him above the gold of Ophir. Mr. Darcy was not a complimentary parent—he would have died sooner than have told his child in so many words how highly he rated her abilities and force of will; but, when he could get from Aurelia an unsolicited opinion about Timmins the land-steward, or Delves the head-gardener, or those unsatisfactory legal advisers, Burjoyce and Gay, he felt as if a load of responsibility were lifted off him.

And Aurelia had been very kind. Whether the prospect of shortly leaving her father made her more gentle and thoughtful than usual towards the old man, who might soon feel lonelier than ever, when his daughter was married and gone from under his roof-tree, it is hard to say; but she had been very patient, ready, and serviceable, divining what the vain weak man was ashamed to confess, and unravelling the tangled skein of more than one affair that lawyer, steward, and employer had combined to complicate into a Gordian-knot. Mr. Darcy was pleased and proud of his daughter; but he would have been ashamed of owning

either sentiment. "Yes, yes, my love; women cannot quite understand these matters. I must talk it over with Timmins. Yes; and I'll write to Burjoyce by this day's post, and I mean to tell him that I choose to have the opinion of some eminent conveyancer on that point about the great tithes," said the master of Beechborough. "What *can* Jenkins be doing that he is so late with the letter-bag?"

In it came at last. There were plenty of newspapers and no lack of business-letters for the Squire, two smaller ones for Aurelia—one of these bore the Irish postmark, and was directed in a queer shaking hand, with a blob of wax for a seal. This letter Aurelia made haste to conceal, opening the other with ostentatious eagerness, and insisting on reading out to her father what that "dear, madcap thing, Georgie Paget," had to say about the croquet-parties and curates of Leatherhead. The ruse was a simple one, and would doubtless have failed of its effects upon a hackneyed man of the world, always watchful of feminine wiles, but it answered well enough with unsuspecting Mr. Darcy: and when, after a decent delay, Aurelia left him to his correspondence, he was quiescent and undoubting as ever. In the Blue-room she opened the letter. Another woman might have torn it open, eager and quivering with impatience, but not she. She drew it forth from the envelope as leisurely as if it had been a milliner's bill, or a dear friend's written raptures about her bridegroom's whiskers, her new home, or the like, and spread it out and read it at a glance.

"Escaped!" that was all she said; "Escaped!" and as she said it, she pressed her hand to her forehead, and was silent for a long time, thinking earnestly, with her eyes bent on the ground. Half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, may have passed by without her stirring. At last she raised her proud head, and walked to the window with a strange smile on her lips. "What was that message of the French

king to false John, Richard Cœur de Lion's brother?" she murmured, in a whisper like the hiss of an angry serpent; " 'Take heed to yourself, for the devil is unchained!' Was not that how the words ran? Strange, how the world goes round, and sin and sorrow repeat themselves!"

There was nothing but sorrow in her face as she gazed out idly on the park, with its falling leaves and fern embrowned to autumn hues, and deer that were beginning to munch hay beneath the palings instead of cropping grass upon the uplands. Nothing but sorrow, yet no such sorrow as we associate with girlhood. It was the darkling melancholy of a strong nature at war with the world and the world's law; and in her stubborn self-will and gloomy impenitence might be traced some resemblance to the lost archangel. But the mood changed, or was dismissed as unseasonable. Women like Aurelia Darcy are not mastered by their thoughts and feelings. They rise superior to the impulses that enslave the weak. Aurelia did so, and went through her usual routine—the music, the stroll in the garden, the novel-reading, the chat with her father, the few words spoken to her maid, exactly as usual. No one could have guessed the weight of the sullen secret that she carried about with her, smiling.

Late in the afternoon Miss Crawse was announced. Mr. Darcy was out, busy with the inspection of a new chaff-cutter from London, and Aurelia received her visitor in the pink drawing-room, in the midst of all the carved alabaster, and pretty cameos, and Dresden china, and malachite tables, that poor dead Lady Maud had collected. Miss Crawse was flushed and breathless, eager to speak; but there was something in Aurelia's face that checked her warmth, some revelation in the classic hardness of the beautiful mouth, firmer than ever now, if the inscrutable grey eyes told nothing.

"Miss Darcy, I came to tell you bad news. I see you know it. In your place, I should not take it so coolly," said Miss Crawse.

"You, too, have heard from Ireland, then?" said Aurelia, in her softest tones, and her smile beamed forth like summer warmth, and her manner was as devoid of fear as it was of excitement. Miss Crawse's answer was prompt.

"Ireland? Certainly not. But he is near us—near you; and I should not be over-comfortable in your place, I can tell you. What's to be done, I don't know; but we are both in the same boat, you and I, and must sink or swim together."

Aurelia uttered no sound, but she bent her head assentingly, and her firm red lips silently seemed to repeat the words her friend had used—"sink or swim together."

Then Miss Crawse, with rapid earnestness, told all—her visit to Mrs. Flinn, her walk to the turnpike on the Blanchminster-road, and of the face she had seen, unobserved herself, through the open lattice. Any observer who had watched those two women would have deemed that the narrator of the tale was the one principally concerned—the one whom danger menaced. For Miss Crawse's eyes were bloodshot, and her breath came gaspingly, and her dusky countenance was of all colours—orange and sallow white, and unhealthy crimson. But Aurelia's cold beauty was unchanged; and the only sign of excitement which she manifested was that her small, white, shapely hand—a hand that matched her face in its combination of delicacy with strength—opened and shut, as she listened, and with the force and action of one who squeezes out a hated life by sheer force of pressure. She listened, and never once interrupted her friend by comment or question till Miss Crawse stopped, panting.

"Now, dear, I cannot ask you to help me, as you once

did," said Aurelia, in her low musical tones; "indeed, how much better that you should be able to say, truthfully, that you knew nothing about my affairs. Still, you can throw some light on the matter. This old woman, this Nanny Brown, bears, you say, an indifferent character?"

"Only as a witch," said Miss Crawse, bluntly. "Her son—Nicholas was his name—has just come out of jail, and her other children were transported; but that's all I know against her."

"Nicholas Brown!" said Aurelia, after a long thoughtful pause. "Yes, he was one of the men who were tried for the death of Sir Joseph's keeper; I remember now. Only give me time to think. A little time, and the obstacle shall be removed. There is no cause, Lydia, for real uneasiness to you or me."

Miss Crawse looked up at the ominous firmness of Aurelia's clear-cut lips, and her own face was livid, and her own voice trembled, as she hoarsely whispered: "Not murder? No, no, not that; Aurelia Darcy, say *that* is not in your thoughts!"

Aurelia actually laughed. Her cool, strong hand rested heavily on the wrist of her former friend. She could feel the pulse beating quick and hard.

"You silly Lydia!" said Miss Darcy, patting Miss Crawse's gloved hand with her firm fingers; "what romantic ideas you have. Murder would be worse than a crime: it would be a folly."

CHAPTER VII.

MISS DARCY GETS UP EARLY.

THE youngest of the under-housemaids at Beechborough, creeping reluctantly down in the cold morning-light to un-

fasten shutters, open windows, and sweep carpets, before her seniors should appear with Turk's-head brushes to put the last artistic touches to the work, gaped and stared in stupid astonishment as Aurelia Darcy, in a grey cloak and linen gown, came swiftly down the great staircase and left the house by the garden door. The under-gardeners, just pulling off their jackets before commencing their task of rolling gravel, mowing grass, and clearing away dead leaves, made their awkward salutation of hat-touching, and gazed after Miss Darcy as her tall form vanished into distance. And the assistant-gamekeeper, who had risen before the sun to make a short professional tour of certain runs and gaps, where it was shrewdly surmised that wires were set, rubbed his eyes as he watched his master's daughter take the path across the meadows that skirted the park.

For Aurelia was not an early riser in general; she was not one of those whom flowers, sweet scented in their morning freshness, and the song of birds and hum of bees, and the indescribable renewal of the world's youth and brilliance, can lure forth from their beds. And on this hazy autumnal morning there was only the promise, not the accomplished fact, of a fine day. The pearls of dew lay thick and heavy on the grass, and the black earth of the paths was moist and slippery, while the hedges were dank and wet. The mist floated breast-high over the meadows, like a silvery fleece, and clung to the red-brown skirts of the tawny wood, and rolled like smoke-wreaths over the upland slopes, and hung like a curtain of pale orange and grey between the struggling sun and the awakening earth. Aurelia was not given to early rising, not fond of walking; but now she was so early that ever and anon she met some labourer trudging to his work, and now she crossed the fields with a steady speed that Miss Crawse, stout little pedestrian as she was, would have found it hard to equal.

From Beechborough Hall to Crowther turnpike, by the road, even supposing that way to be curtailed by a short-cut through the green lanes, the distance is over four miles ; but across the country the distance is not above three miles, and Aurelia knew the way well, as she always knew a track that she had once traversed. Bound on the errand, the purport of which was linked with her secret, Aurelia had no choice but to go on foot and alone. To order out a carriage, to bid the grooms saddle her horse, would have been fatal to her purpose, for if she rode or drove she could not go unattended. And there are cases in which servants are spies. This was one of them. So Aurelia Darcy pressed on to her goal, as heedless of the song of the lark, trilling out music overhead, as of the heavy dew that wetted her feet as the path failed, and merely a faint track remained to guide her across the grass-fields from stile to stile.

Aurelia neither heard nor saw any sight or sound, the perception of which was unnecessary for the object she had in view. But her thoughts were busy ; and not the less so because in her powerful mind they were marshalled in logical sequence, and did not crowd tumultuously forward, clamouring for an audience, as is the case with many of us. To this woman, cradled in luxury, ever prosperous, and not yet twenty-one, but whose will was as strong as if it had been tempered in the black waters of adversity, life was a game. A game partly of chance, partly of skill. The best player, to whom bad cards had been dealt by fortune, might lose the game, that Aurelia's philosophy admitted ; but scarcely any advantages could profit a bungler, of that she was quite sure. And her belief was that she had herself, with such cards as had fallen to her lot, played her game well and skilfully—of late years, at least. For she, too, had been impulsive once, and had made a mistake. A great, grievous

mistake. An error of judgment that it would require the keenest skill, and courage, and firmness, to repair. But that might be done. With moderate good-luck, it *must* be done, so Aurelia thought.

Miss Darcy would have been angry, and would have believed that it was her right to be angry, with any one who should have set her down as a heathen. She went to church. She treated religious matters and religious persons with respect. She said her prayers with exemplary regularity, in public and in private, and if she did little to make the world better or holier, at least no act or word of hers, to all appearance, tended to make it worse. But she was a practical pagan. She really did believe that the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong, unless some untoward accident or some fatal fault should intervene. But, given certain worldly gifts, given also a moderate share of good fortune, and Aurelia felt nearly as certain that success must follow as a mathematician of the result of his carefully-reasoned problem. Yes, the world with its rich prizes, was for the wise and the adroit; and if the plotter saw the ruin of his hopes, why it was only that the qualities were lacking, or that chance was adverse. Yes, Chance. As for the idea that a Divine Power really did shape and mould our rough-hewn acts, adapting the crude products of our blindness and our selfishness to the great harmonious whole, Aurelia drove that idea from her; and, like all other clever schemers, she erred in so doing.

There was a little boy beginning betimes to earn his fourpence by scaring crows, in a field near Crowther turnpike. This little fellow, bribed by a sixpence, clattered joyfully off to do Aurelia's bidding, and called Mrs. Brown of the turnpike, whom he knew well, to speak with a lady. Mrs. Brown came. A little white-haired woman, with bright eyes and a quaint face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles. A very nice-looking, tidy old person, and as such sure to earn the

approval of churchwarden, Board, and clergyman. Respectability peeped forth from her well-starched widow's cap, her clean collar, her dark gown of some dead woollen stuff, and her snow-white apron. Many of those who keep turnpikes are repulsive-looking persons, ill-dressed and not conciliatory of manner—Mrs. Brown was smooth of speech and neat of raiment. She said "Thank you" civilly enough for every carter's fourpence, and never kept travellers waiting even in the worst of weather. Her accounts were well kept. The trustees of the Blanchminster turnpike-trust had no better servant. If the gossips of Patcham chose to set down old Nanny for a witch, at least she was in the good graces of squire and parson.

She came quickly. The little crow-boy had made his report, and, besides, a glance showed her that Aurelia was a lady. She came courtesying up to where Mr. Darcy's heiress stood beside the stile, smoothing out her apron as she drew near, and smiling obsequiously as she asked what the young lady might be pleased to want. Nanny Brown had had many a visit from persons of Aurelia's standing in the world. Some of these were silly girls, who wanted cosmetics to beautify their complexions, and who had been attracted by Mrs. Brown's talent for compounding washes and unguents. Some, sillier still, wanted their fortunes told, on the strength of Nanny's evil fame; but the turnpike-keeper was too shrewd to forfeit her patrons' good will for a pitiful half-crown, and the seekers after forbidden lore were sent empty away. Others came not to ask, but to give—to give tracts, kind words, counsel, and religious instruction; and Mrs. Brown thankfully took their little pamphlets and their advice, and the little presents that accompanied them. Probably at first she considered that Miss Darcy had come on one of the errands above mentioned.

"Look at me," said Aurelia, in her rich ringing voice. Humble Mrs. Brown looked up; she had not ventured to

take that liberty as yet, and as she looked, it was strange to see how the artificial smile faded and died out from Mrs. Brown's face. Her twinkling eyes, undimmed by age, had met the steady grey eyes of Aurelia, and she felt herself in presence of a powerful nature. Only a word or two had been spoken, but Mrs. Brown knew that the lady in the linen gown and grey cloak had not come to offer tracts, or to buy cosmetics, or to sue for a peep into futurity. Mrs. Brown, thus invited, stared long and earnestly at her visitor, and the lines of her own hard vulpine mouth and high cheek-bones came out harder and sharper as the false smile died away.

"I am Miss Darcy of Beechborough. I have heard of you. I believe that you can do me a service. Will you walk with me a little way up the path here?" said Aurelia; and Mrs. Brown silently complied, walking mincingly beside the tall figure of the stranger, and stealing many a wary glance upward at the fair audacious face, that seemed no more to shrink from scrutiny than does the face of a statue. The very frankness of Aurelia's mention of her name was puzzling to Mrs. Brown. She had had customers before who came from market towns miles off, and who did their best to enwrap themselves and their shallow secrets in mystery. The freckled purchasers of her washes were not fond of telling their names. The young ladies who desired, per proxy, to read the stars, were very ambiguous on the earthly subject of their addresses. But Aurelia, daughter and only child of the rich Mr. Darcy, and an earl's grandchild—old Nanny knew that too—was perfectly outspoken. Whatever she wanted—and Nanny suspected that the possessor of those grey fearless eyes, and that broad forehead and firm mouth, was not likely to have taken so much trouble without a motive—whatever she wanted, she made no attempt at disguise.

On her side, Aurelia knew what she was about. Her frankness about her name and abode, like all that she did, was calculated. She was well aware that she must be recognised, on slight inquiry, within miles of her father's house. And she read Mrs. Brown like a book, and a very easy book too. Here was a hard, hypocritical, malignant nature, miserly very likely, as the thin bloodless lips hinted, but certainly one that hankered after gains that could be earned without the sacrifice of a fair outward show. With such a nature, Aurelia could deal as easily as a chemist with the acids and alkalies that he has been manipulating through years of toil.

The conversation was long, but the parts were very unequal. Aurelia's rich low voice rolled on like a river, sweeping away opposition, not by violence, but by a steady energy that brooked no hindrance. It was evident, by the varied inflexions of tone, that Miss Darcy was suggesting difficulties, but only to crush and quell them; that she was putting the matter in question under different lights, but only to show more markedly the accuracy of her own fixed idea. The shriller voice of Mrs. Brown broke in at times, sometimes in questioning accents, more often in fawning assent.

"A hundred pounds. Ten to-day; the rest within six weeks," said Aurelia, drawing several gold pieces from her purse, and letting them jingle as she poured them in a yellow stream into the gloved palm of her left hand, but careful not to look aside at the covetous glitter that she well knew must be in Mrs. Brown's green eyes. "A hundred pounds, not to be earned, remember, by doing anything wrong or sinful, but by a good action—a good action."

"I should like to serve you, Miss," said the old woman, and her thin voice quivered with eagerness, and the sinews

in her meagre throat stood out like knotted cordage as she spoke.

"Then fetch your son. I should like to explain it to him, as we shall want his help," said Aurelia, with no triumph and no embarrassment in her tone.

Mrs. Brown hesitated. Her son, she said, her poor misled Nicholas, had friends who led him into follies, and who, on the preceding night, had led him into the folly of bestial drunkenness, or, as old Nanny euphuistically phrased it, of having "a drop." He was still sleeping off that drop, and might be out of temper if disturbed.

"You know, perhaps, Miss," said his mother, doubtfully, "mayhaps you know that prisons, and bad company, and trouble, have made my son Nicholas rather rough-spoken and short in his manners. Perhaps you might be frightened."

"Do I look as if I could be frightened?" said Aurelia, quietly; "call him, for I must go home, and I shall only have time to say a word or two."

Mrs. Brown went, but either she was very cautious in her choice of a mode of arousing the interesting sleeper, or she preferred to explain how matters stood before bringing him to the stile leading into the stubble-field where Aurelia waited, for Miss Darcy looked twice at her watch before old Nanny reappeared with a shambling, evil-countenanced fellow of middle age, with cropped hair, and a bloated, ugly face—the face of a sly ruffian who has escaped the gallows too narrowly to feel his bull-neck as yet quite safe from the hangman's clammy touch.

He shuffled up the path, leering impudently, but was abashed, in spite of himself, by Miss Darcy's dignified carriage and utter dauntlessness of bearing; the grimy forefinger went up to the brim of the battered hat, and the bloodshot eyes looked down, in unwilling deference. Him, too, Aurelia read like a book. Perhaps nay probably, the

daughter of George Darcy and Lady Maud Darcy had never spoken to a felon, nor looked into a felon's wicked eyes before, but she was not in the least at a loss. Old Nanny could not help admiring in her sleeve the tact with which Aurelia talked over this savage, not always to be managed even by his clever old mother, who had more wit in one of her skinny fingers than Nicholas in his ungainly body.

"For the matter o' that, ma'am, I'd have a poor opinion of myself if I was to be afeard of a slim London-looking whipper-snapper, like our lodger. But I can get two or three old mates, true-blue kivities that I can trust to, to bear a hand. We'll——"

"You will do what has to be done, very well and thoroughly, I am sure"—it was thus that Aurelia interrupted her agent—"and at the same time you will be too sensible to do more; violence is quite unnecessary, and no force need be used beyond that necessary for purposes of restraint. You understand?"

The graduate of Warwick jail nodded assent. "We'll do it, mum, as we had ought," said he, thoughtfully plucking bits of hawthorn from the hedge, and crushing them to pulp between his tobacco-blackened front teeth, while he kept his eyes on the ground; "Jem, and the weaver, and I, can manage to do the trick and never let out a word about it, over our drink or what not! We're old pals, and shan't split on one another for all the chaplains and beaks in England. But there's one thing. Mother says the chap's got fire-arms."

"Fire-arms!" repeated Aurelia, almost thrown off her guard, for she was really no braver, where physical danger was concerned, than the average of her sex. What gave her the semblance of courage was her mental daring, and the polished adamant strength of an intellect that cast

aside imaginary terrors. But of death, of an early, and especially a violent death, she entertained as true a dread and as profound a loathing as ever did any of the children of this world. The mention of deadly weapons, near at hand, and in the possession of one who had little cause, as she well knew, to deal mercifully with her, caused the chill that crept, like the coils of a frozen snake, around her heart. But such was her self-command, that to her very exclamation of alarm she contrived to give a tone of scornful incredulity, and to follow it by a little laugh of what seemed genuine contempt.

Mrs. Brown, narrowly eyeing her fair young client, did not see so much as the twitching of a muscle or the slightest change of colour; and the sheep-stealer looked up, with something of boorish admiration in his dull eyes.

"I likes pluck in my pals—no offence, mum. 'Tis a pleasure to work for such a lady as you, and I'd do the job if he'd got fifty pistols." And the fellow added an oath, meant to reassure his employer as to his determination, the ugly sound of which almost betrayed Aurelia into a shudder of dismay. She had narrowly avoided showing some sign of disgust and anger when the blood-stained jail-bird before her spoke of her as an accomplice. Was it indeed come to this? She the accomplice of such as these! No, they were her tools, and, when done with, could be laid aside.

Few more words were spoken, but she counted out the ten clinking golden coins into the wrinkled palm of old Nanny, and she agreed with the old woman upon a token by which the tidings of success should be forwarded to her.

"Remember, I dropped this handkerchief in a visit to your cottage," she said, handing the delicate scrap of embroidered cambric to the turnpike-keeper. "You send it me back, when all is comfortably managed; but mention no place, and no name in your message, except mine."

When Aurelia reached her home it was still early, and the Squire was not down yet, as her maid informed her. The horror of Jennings at the wet boots and draggled skirt—the boots were soaked by the dew as if they had been lying in a river, and the soft leather was torn away piecemeal in the effort to take them off—was only equalled by her curiosity as to the cause of her young lady's matutinal expedition. But her curiosity was baffled. Aurelia was not the girl to make her waiting-woman the repository of her secrets, and thus to reverse their relative positions. She merely said, with imperturbable good-humour, that she did not think early hours and morning walks worth the trouble they occasioned, and that she should scarcely try the experiment again. Presently she was seated at the breakfast-table, neat and calm in attire and deportment, pouring out her father's tea as demurely as if Nanny Brown and grim Nicholas had been but denizens of a dream-world.

It was not until the following morning that a servant brought in, on a salver, a little embroidered handkerchief worked with Aurelia's cipher.

"A boy brought this, Miss, if you please. Said you left it behind by mistake, Miss, in his grandmother's cottage, yesterday."

Aurelia picked up the handkerchief, and looked at the letters in the corner of it.

"To be sure," she said. "I thought I had dropped it, walking. Give the boy something for his trouble, Jennings!"

And the butler withdrew, unsuspecting, while his young mistress composedly finished directing the letter she had just sealed, and which was addressed to Cornelius Kelly, Esq., M.D., Nine Stone Bridge, Ogletown, Ireland.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEFORE THE BALL.

“CARDS out for a ball at Beechborough, eh? Gay doings! Well, we’ll go—yes, we’ll go,” said the Squire of Stoke. Now, this was no trifling concession on the part of the speaker: first, because Mr. Mainwaring hated balls; and secondly, because, up to a very recent period, he had cared very little for cultivating any intercourse with the Darcys. When the new owners of Beechborough came to live in their recently-purchased halls, none of the old county families had been more ready to welcome them than the Mainwarings. But oil and wine will not mingle, nor will natures radically dissimilar, and tastes always at variance, unite in friendly intimacy. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Mainwaring could not “get on” with one another in conversation. They differed in politics, but that mattered little. They differed in habits, principles, modes of thought, and could no more understand each other than a Samoyed can pity an Arab’s drought and scorched skin. Then, too, Mrs. Mainwaring, inclined at first to be very pitiful and tender with the motherless girl who was the nearest neighbour of their own rank, had gradually grown to dislike the calm, cold Aurelia. The Mainwaring girls were all in the nursery or schoolroom, except Lucy, and Lucy had wished very much to be Aurelia’s friend; but some instinct, analogous to that which was inspired by Dr. Fell, had warned her back. There was little cordiality between the families.

So much for the previous state of feeling of Stoke Park towards Beechborough Hall. But Aurelia’s unobtrusive kind-heartedness, on the day which witnessed the cub-hunt and Kitty’s accident, had wrought wonders in modifying the

opinions of that young damsel's parents and elder sister towards their neighbour. Kitty was well and saucy, all but the sprained thumb that gave her some pain yet, and the scar, half healed, on her temple. But the image of his favourite daughter, pale, dishevelled, and stained with mud and blood, lying on the patchwork counterpane of the smith's bed, was often before the Squire's eyes. And along with it rose that other image of Aurelia, with her candid smile and sweet cheery voice, as she came to tell him that her carriage had been fetched for Kate's benefit.

So it came about that not only Mrs. Mainwaring, who was naturally glad that her daughter should appear at any available ball, but the Squire himself, who generally had to be impressed and cajoled into the *peine forte et dure* of escort duty to race balls, hunt balls, and county assemblies, was willing and almost eager to pay their somewhat neglected acquaintances the compliment of an early acceptance of their invitation. Kitty, who had been more spoiled than ever since her tumble, and who still exerted an invalid's privilege of finding fault, railed at the cruelty of fortune in not having ante-dated her birthday a few years, that she too might have been present at the Beechborough entertainment.

"I should have worn orange-coloured tulle over satin, I think, because yellow suits dark people so well. I always mean to wear yellow at evening-parties when I come out, or else dark blue. I like light blue and pink best, but then they wouldn't suit me, I'm sure. Light blue is just the thing for you, Lucy, and so it would be for Miss Darcy, though she's not a bit like you. What do you mean to wear? White? Nothing but white? Well, I shouldn't like to go to a ball without a bit of colour in my dress, though, to be sure, you'll look like a bride if papa gets you down a dress from the London milliner again, as he did last

year, you remember, and how nice you looked, Lucy. Well, I shall see you dressed, and that's some comfort, though it is a shame."

Lucy had thoughts and hopes of her own, of which she said nothing. Thoughts half defined, but none the less sweet from their very vagueness. Timid little hopes, like half-fledged birds that dared not venture beyond the nest. Such hopes and thoughts as might blamelessly be cherished by a good and gentle girl, in the fresh spring of her womanhood, when the world seemed opening out brighter and sunnier vistas, day by day. Lucy Mainwaring was not one of those severe persons who are perpetually cross-examining their own hearts and taking stock of their affections. She did not own to herself how very dear her cousin, Hastings, Lord Lynn, had become to her during the pleasant months of their association. But she did admit to herself, blushing, that she should be glad to know with certainty that he cared much, very much indeed, about her.

One thing more. Lucy had an unwelcome, unrecognised idea that she was jealous of Aurelia. She tried to shut it out, she did what she could to banish it, but it came back like remorse to a sinner's pillow. Jealousy is a mean passion for the most part, born of vanity, envy, and that avaricious self-love that grudges all admiration or devotion to others. But Lucy's pure mind was so very free from this base alloy, that real jealousy, with its rankling torments and its envenomed atmosphere, could not take root there. What she called by that name was, in truth, a fear lest her bright cloud-castle of happiness, with its rainbow battlements, and towers gay with the hues of hope, should be shattered by the hand of another. She did fear lest some one—and that some one Aurelia Darcy—should come between her and Hastings, and rob her of a chance of his love.

This fear bore date from a time, recent indeed when measured by the almanac, but remote when gauged by the subtler standard of human feelings and mental progress. In the early summer, when the withered leaves that now fell, rotting, at every puff of wind, were green and young, Lord Lynn was a constant visitor at Stoke, and very much of his leisure was spent with Lucy, with whom, as a kinsman, he was from the first on a footing of all but brotherly familiarity. They had walked and ridden, and read poetry together, and the little great world of that section of the county had already settled, very much to Mrs. Grundy's satisfaction, that Lucy was engaged, or going to be engaged, to her cousin, Lord Lynn, when Aurelia Darcy stepped in. Now, Lucy Mainwaring, it has been said, did not much like Aurelia. And the reason she did not like her was partly instinctive, partly because Lucy had been much disappointed in Aurelia. Disappointed, that is, in the sister-friend that she had hoped to find, when first she came under the spell of Miss Darcy's bewitching manners. She had soon found out that Aurelia was hard and unsympathetic, and given to despise the petty round of small cares and duties, small kindnesses, little tributes towards a reign of peace and good will upon earth, that made up so much of Lucy's daily life. Aurelia did not care much for the poor around her. She preferred to sketch a ruinous, and therefore picturesque, cottage to passing the squalid threshold to carry aid to the ague-stricken dwellers there. She was indifferent, incredulous, sarcastic, where Lucy was all faith and pity. There could be no friendship between the two girls.

But when, one morning in the bright month of June, Miss Darcy came straight to the point, as was her way, paying an early visit to Stoke, and saying with earnest, pleading tones: "Please, Lucy, will you help me to be good. I do so wish it; I have been thinking very seriously over what

you said to me last winter. I have never lived among people who were kind and tender with the poor, and anxious for their welfare, as you and dear Mrs. Mainwaring are; and I do so wish to learn to be good, and to be of some use at last, if you will only teach me how."

Lucy remembered well how she had gone up crying, and put her arm round Aurelia's neck, and kissed her in an ecstasy of simple unselfish joy. She felt as if she had another sister given her in that hour, and indeed for some time the girls were very intimate and almost inseparable. Aurelia went everywhere with Lucy; to the school, where she took a class with great meekness, to the cottages of the needy, to the bedsides of the sick, and was liberal of smiles and kind words, liberal too of money and blankets, and port from the Beechborough cellars, and new clothes for the children of large struggling families, ragged in spite of endless darning. Indeed, Miss Darcy was by nature the reverse of niggardly; if she could have cleared off all the poverty and misery from the parish by drawing a cheque, even a very heavy one, she would have drawn it willingly. It was her time that she grudged, not her money. Indeed, she had always been only too well supplied with ready cash, and she was not only her father's heiress, but Lady Maud's small fortune, a decent portion for the daughter of a poor earl, had been settled on Aurelia. It was hers, and though she was not of age, her trustees, knowing her father's wealth must come to her, and render economy needless, were indulgent trustees, and honoured her drafts freely.

Aurelia did not grudge her money to the poor; she did grudge her time and trouble. Yet now, for the first time in her life, she seemed indefatigable in works of mercy. She would read chapter after chapter to the deafest and most cross of old women, bedridden through long years in miserable chambers; she was wonderfully patient with

the children, who learned faster from her than from any other instructress, for she had the knack of imparting knowledge. A sort of soothing influence seemed to emanate from her presence in a house of woe; mourners were comforted, the sick were won over to think less grievously of their ailments, the needy of their wants, after a visit from Miss Darcy. She seldom came empty-handed; but the attachment which the poor felt for her was not cupboard-love. There were ladies in the parish who gave more, and at ten times the cost to themselves in self-denial, but who evoked less gratitude than Aurelia, whose voice and smile had a magic, quite beyond the reach of competitors. In all this good effect produced, there were but the signs of what follows from contact with a strong nature. You may meet with a hundred common-place spirits, and pass them indifferently by, but a strong nature will not be ignored. It demands our love or our hate, and is not content to conjure up mere negative sentiments. And as Aurelia's strength came veiled in smiles, and pleasant words, and gifts most royally given, the poor blessed her, and Lucy thought her a paragon of womanhood.

Only, somehow, when Lord Lynn, who very often looked in at the school, while the two young ladies were busy with their chubby-cheeked pupils—who very often strolled with them across the common to some outlying cottage, or waited for them on the foot-bridge that they must cross in coming back from the village—when Lord Lynn had formed a very high opinion of Aurelia's beauty, and talent, and goodness, and had begun to be a frequent visitor at Beechborough, Aurelia's fair stateliness was less and less often visible at cottage doors. After all, as she said to Lucy, her duties were at home. Beechborough was in Holton parish, not in Sockhurst parish, in which latter parochial division of Warwickshire lay Stoke Park. Miss Darcy was afraid

that she had rather neglected her father's people ; her own poor, in short. So her visits to Stoke and the Sockhurst flock of destitute and ailing, dwindled away to the proverbial paucity of angels' visits, and her intimacy with Lucy died the death that nips most girlish friendships in the flower, if not in the bud.

It is doubtful if the poor of Holton were much the better for the kind resolution of their Squire's daughter, to devote her ministering offices entirely to them. But, at any rate, Lord Lynn, who had been a stranger to the Darcys when first the friendship between Lucy and Aurelia began, was very often at the Hall, though by no means so often as at Stoke, and the gossips of the county were divided in their predictions as to the future Baroness Lynn. Lucy was slow to think evil, but really the whole affair had an ugly look. It seemed, it did seem as though Aurelia's sudden resolve to be good, and her abrupt plunge into the character of a Lady Bountiful, were merely parts of a deliberate plan to wile away Lucy's cousin, and Lucy's probable admirer, and that, when the prize was gained, the mask was dropped. Lucy never owned that she thought this ; but she did think it, and Mr. and Mrs. Mainwaring thought so too. But for Aurelia's kindness at the time when Kitty met with her accident, most likely Stoke Park would have declined any invitation from Beechborough Hall.

The thoughtfulness of Aurelia's, coupled with such frank unconsciousness of any cause of offence or ill will, as Miss Darcy's manner expressed, had softened the hearts of the Mainwarings, father, mother, and daughter, towards her. And Lucy, generous and glad to think well of even an estranged friend, began to think Aurelia might not have been to blame in that other matter of her cousin. Perhaps Lord Lynn only took pleasure in Aurelia's company because she was so clever and well informed, being able to talk on

subjects quite out of her, Lucy's, depth ; and perhaps Miss Darcy had never really tried to win him away from her, Lucy. Perhaps he was not to be so won. He had never spoken a word of love ; but the eyes have a language as well as the flowers, and a look, a tone, the pressure of a hand, may mean so much. Lucy felt almost sure, very, very nearly sure, that Hastings, her dear cousin, loved her, and she looked forward, coyly but hopefully, to the time when he should breathe his love, and ask for hers in return. He would do so at the ball, perhaps, who could tell ?

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE BALL.

“How very well Miss Darcy looks to-night—showy and splendid ; quite the queen of the ball,” muttered Mrs. Blithe to toothless old Lady Midgett, who played wall-flower at her side, and who had come in charge of three daughters as tall and formidable as grenadiers. “Don't you think, though, that, in her own house, it would have been better taste to have been less magnificent in her costume ?”

And yet, although the amiable speaker did contrive, in social fashion, to add the sting of censure to the honey of praise, the criticism was hardly a fair one. It was Aurelia who looked magnificent, not her costume. She was in plain white satin, without so much as bright-coloured sash or flower, or scrap of ribbon to relieve the whiteness. To be sure, she wore the diamonds that her grandfather, old Mr. Hanks, had in the joy of his heart presented to her mother, Lady Maud, as a wedding-gift—very costly diamonds, and

very brightly they flashed on the queenly head and the white neck and shapely white arms. But the beautiful rounded arms, so full, so firm, so smoothly polished, like Carrara marble, seemed rather to grace the diamonds than to borrow lustre from them.

The ball was a brilliant one, for Aurelia had for once received *carte blanche* to manage it as she pleased, and no outlay or toil had been spared. A famous decorator, who in his day had decked out a thousand fairy palaces as ephemeral as the hoar-frost on a window-pane, had come down from London to exercise his art at Beechborough. The result was a pretty profusion of rare exotic flowers and plants, turning the supper-room, in especial, into the semblance of a nook of Indian jungle that had found its way to Warwickshire. A profusion, too, of dainty devices, wherein tinted lamps and glistening evergreens, and roses that June appeared to have lent to October, and trophies of glittering steel and gold, combined harmoniously. Besides these, there were fountains tinkling small music as their drops fell from the shining stones and shells of little grottos, draped with green soft moss and feathery ferns, into the tiny pools where gold-fish swam unconcernedly. There were rich new hangings to the windows, an archway of greenery and coloured lamps, through which the carriages drove up to the door, and lamps, and clusters of lamps, twinkling like glow-worms among the trees of the garden.

"How beautiful!" "How sweetly pretty!" "How fairy-like!" These and other feminine ejaculations showed that the company could not repress their admiration, more or less conventionally expressed, for the result of their entertainer's forethought.

Aurelia had done it all. Even the magician whom she had summoned from his retreat in the vasty deep of London, and who was better used to display his skill in ducal man-

sions and earls' castles than in the Hall of a country gentleman, was surprised by her taste. Some of his best effects were due to her; but she by no means claimed credit for the prettinesses that she had invented, but left the *maestro* from London the full merit of the designs. As for Mr. Darcy, he had exercised considerable self-control in refraining from meddling or cavilling throughout the whole preliminary process. He had not one original idea, except this, that he could set others right. But on this occasion, by special favour to his daughter, he abstained from correcting so much as a single mistake. He indemnified himself by a vow, that this his first ball given on English ground—Lady Maud had often entertained abroad—should also be his last; yes, positively the last. Men are truer prophets sometimes than they wot of. George Cook Darcy is not likely again to figure as a ball-giver.

There was a numerous, and what the county paper called a "distinguished," company. The rank, wealth, and old descent of that portion of the county of Warwickshire were very well represented there; and this was the more satisfactory, because it had once been feared that the weak point of the assembly would prove to be the social standing of the guests. The Darcys were hardly recognised as yet among the magnates of the province. They were like some parvenue dynasty that has hardly obtained the precious notice of the *Almanach de Gotha*, and to whose chief the other august ones of Europe are shy of penning the words: "Monsieur, mon frère."

Indeed, though Warwick is not so prudish about pedigree as Salop and Cheshire, the county people did not take kindly at first to George Darcy and his daughter. Aurelia's father had done nothing to ennoble his origin; he had shown no brains, no courage, no excellence in any walk of life. He was not even a mute M.P. He was not an active

officer of the militia, or even a patron and promoter of the Volunteer movement, just then in its crowing infancy. Nobody could say that George Darcy was very good, or a scholar, or a sportsman, or even funny. He was merely a dull, peevish man, whose one achievement in the world's battle had been to marry a nobleman's daughter. Lady Maud might easily have floated the Darcys, had she lived; but she did not live; and the widower could only wish for the respect and intimacy of the great ones of the province, helplessly wish for these things, but without effort, as a child might wish for the moon.

It was not until Aurelia had come back from a long visit paid to her aunt, Lady Harriet Ogle, in Ireland, that the position of the new-comers had, socially speaking, begun to improve. But though the process of sapping the prejudices of her neighbours was necessarily slow, Aurelia triumphed gradually over their passive resistance. Family after family gave in their adhesion, rumbled and rattled to Beechborough in their roomy yellow or green carriages, asked the Darcys to dinner, and accepted the hospitality of the son of honest Mr. Hanks. There was no harm in the Darcys, the good folks sagely said; and of late the progress of Aurelia towards the summit of social success had been wonderfully accelerated; for it was rumoured that Aurelia was to marry Lord Lynn, and if so, it would never do to give Lady Lynn of Hollingsley Court reason to avenge slights offered to Miss Darcy. So the ball was a full one; and the jolly cavalry officers, who had come all the way from their quarters at Coventry, had good cause to declare to one another that the party was a "stunning hop."

Aurelia played the part of hostess—always a difficult one for an unmarried girl—very well and tastefully. The most pury and censorious of the dowagers owned that her manners were very good; that she was quite well-bred; and, crowning praise, that she was not the least like her father

—poor man! Indeed, her self-possession and tact were worthy of much commendation.

But what would the old ladies who praised Aurelia have said had they seen her, an hour before it was time to dress, glancing over a letter that the postman had mislaid, and which had come to hand late in the day—a letter dated from a place called Nine Stone Bridge, in Ireland, and signed Mary Kelly; a short letter, written in a weak feminine hand, and blistered by tears wrung forth by agitation and nervousness more than by genuine grief, in which letter Mary Kelly announced that her husband, the “Doctor,” was lying helpless in the agonies of delirium tremens, and so was quite unable to comply with Miss Darcy’s wish of hurrying over to England to obey her commands. It was a bad case, the practitioner who had been called in declared. The sick man’s constitution was strong, but the effects of long intemperance were but too powerful, and whisky was soon likely to close the career of Michael Kelly, M.D. ‘The parish priest—Dr. Kelly’s poor ill-treated wife, but his patient nurse now, wrote word to that effect to Aurelia—the parish priest was very desirous to come to the sufferer’s bedside; but in his lucid moments, the dying man was obstinate in his assertion that his word was his bond, and better than any bond that lawyers ever drew; and that without Miss Darcy’s leave, he would not confess, however tremendous, according to the faith of his church, the consequences of such obduracy might be.

With the contents of this letter freshly stamped upon her memory, with the ashes of the letter itself still lying, flimsy blackened tinder, on the hearthstone of her favourite Blue Room, and with a dark under-current of thought flowing through her mind, this girl of twenty did the honours of Beechborough with faultless composure. The chaperons praised her; the young ladies, her contemporaries, envied her good looks, and blaze of jewels, and serene majesty,

which quality, however, they agreed to be better suited to a married woman than to a spinster. The men—those who danced—beset her with requests for a waltz or a mazurka, or, if a round dance were not still in the market, for a quadrille. To walk through a quadrille would not be such very slow work, the Coventry dragoons thought, with such a partner as Aurelia. But neither dowager nor damsel, neither beaux nor portly old fathers of families, talking of turnips and oil-cake in the doorways, suspected how heavy was the secret that their fair hostess hid behind her mask of gracious smiles.

There was only, in popular estimation, one rival present, whose attractions were worthy to cope with those of Aurelia. This was Lucy Mainwaring. She was in white, too, like Aurelia. But while Miss Darcy's style of dress, as befitted the wearer, was rich and massive in its character, and set off by gems, Lucy had no ornament but the spray of white Alpine heath in her glossy brown hair. She looked very lovely, however, with a cloud of delicate white crape floating about her as she was whirled round in the dance by Lord Lynn, with her bright colour, and pure healthful complexion, and soft brown eyes. Many critics declared, that though Aurelia was certainly a superb creature, Lucy was really by far the prettier of the two, and a hundred times more the type of what an English girl should be. Those who piqued themselves on their insight into the feelings and conduct of their neighbours, were perplexed to see with what vexatious impartiality Lord Lynn, the most eligible of the unmarried men present, divided his attentions between his gentle cousin and the queenly mistress of the Hall. Such certainly seemed to be the case; though the result was different. It was impossible for even the most veteran gossip to affirm that Aurelia showed the slightest preference for Lord Lynn, or seemed flattered by his notice.

She danced with him twice, certainly, but then he was known to be intimate at Beechborough; and she smiled at what he said, just as impartially as at the compliments or remarks of the officers of Coventry, absolute strangers to her and the county.

Lucy, however, could not quite avoid betraying her innocent preference for her kinsman's society. Her eyes brightened when he spoke to her; her smile was never so happy, or her step so elastic, as when he was her partner; and she could not help the flush that mantled her face when first he came into the ball-room and her eyes met his. There were plenty of people to take note of all these things; there always are; and many tongues wagged to the same purport, that whether or no Lord Lynn was going to propose for his cousin, pretty Miss Mainwaring, it was clear that the young lady in question was over head and ears in love with him.

The supper was worthy of the ball. The force of Gunter—people still swore by Gunter in 1859—could no further go. The long tables were a blaze of gold and silver plate, gaudy tropical flowers, reared in hothouses for the Covent-garden Market, trickling fountains of perfumed water, crystal, Bohemian glass, rare fruits, and things meant to be eaten, sipped, or looked at, according to their specialities. It was a capital supper; the popping of champagne corks and cracker bonbons made noise enough for a Volunteer review; there was a perpetual babble of voices and din of laughter mingling with the inevitable clatter which even silver-gilt forks will make on the most delicate porcelain plates; people enjoyed themselves very much; and the honest captains from Coventry, as they dipped their wax-ended mustaches in creaming Clicquot worthy an emperor's drinking, freely admitted that the "feed was as good as the hop," that old Darcy did the thing well, and that the ball

at Beechborough might vie with the most brilliant affairs registered in their military memories, even with that crowning festival which "we" gave on entering York.

Dancing went on, more merrily than ever, after supper. The music rang out more wildly and gaily than before, and fifty couples were twirling at once to a lively waltz tune; then Aurelia, in answer to Lord Lynn's half-jesting petition, consulted her little chronicle of engagements, and found that she had promised him the waltz in question. They danced it together very well, for Lord Lynn was a good dancer, and people said, and with truth, that Aurelia's stately figure never looked to more advantage. Then they walked together, arm in arm, through the rooms, and into the conservatory, where a subdued light gleamed through the screen of hothouse flowers, and so out upon the broad stone terrace overlooking the gardens. It was a still, sultry night. The day had been one of those warm, breezeless, brilliant days that in October sometimes suggest August; and everybody had said that the Darcys had been most fortunate in their weather. The air was warm, but it seemed gratefully cool after the heat of the crowded rooms.

The gossips of Warwickshire, among other drawing-room canons, had laid down the axiom, that Lord Lynn was a flirt. They were quite wrong; the young owner of Hollingsley Court did not flirt. He was neither hard enough nor shallow enough to play the hackneyed part of roving, in butterfly style, from flower to flower, with the certainty of perishing, as butterflies perish, when summer is done, uncared for and alone. The only two names which rumour coupled with his were those of Lucy, his cousin, and Aurelia; and whatever others might think, Lord Lynn felt sure that his affection for Lucy was of a brotherly character—yes, he was certain that it was so. Lucy was a

very good, gentle, charming little thing, and to be in her company was very refreshing and agreeable. He paid her much attention, because she was his friend and kinswoman; and it was a privilege to have such a friend—so affectionate, tender, and trusting. There had been a time, before Aurelia became so frequent a visitor at Stoke, when Lord Lynn had doubted whether he did not feel more warmly towards Lucy than was consistent with his theory of fraternal intercourse. She was very pretty, unselfish, rich in good qualities, and such a wife would have ensured the happiness of his home. But——

But there was Aurelia. Hastings, Baron Lynn, if he was unable to resist the fascination which seemed to envelop Aurelia like an enchanted atmosphere, had not succumbed blindly. By some strange instinct, much as he admired Aurelia, he was conscious of the existence in her nature of certain elements foreign to those in his own. That she was profoundly artful, he did not suspect; that she was callous, indolent, and selfish, he did. And Aurelia had, if not an enemy, at least an opponent, to whom she had never given more than a passing thought. Lord Lynn's mother, between whom and himself there had always been full confidence, wrote repeatedly to her son to express her regret that, if fame were to be believed, he was paying his addresses to Miss Darcy.

"I have nothing whatever to say against that young lady" (one of the dowager's recent letters ran thus). "Indeed, I have made it my business, for your sake, to inquire concerning her of such of our old Warwickshire friends as come this way, and I am bound to say that they one and all describe her conduct and character as irreproachable. I dare say she is well-principled, and would do no discredit to your choice. But, dearest Hastings, I have always longed and prayed that your wife might be one whom I

could really love and cherish as my own dear daughter. Now, I have seen this Miss Darcy once, when she was much younger, and travelling in Italy with her father and poor Lady Maud, who brought her up very injudiciously, I suspect. She was quite a child then, but a very remarkable child. She almost frightened me. She was not froward, or noisy, or sullen, as spoiled children often are ; but there was something in those cold grey eyes of hers—something pitiless—something that made me shudder. She had a very pretty smile and winning manner, and though she did not promise to be very handsome—I hear she is a great beauty now, but growing girls disappoint all predictions—she was much liked, and not a little praised for her cleverness ; but I know, Hastings, what I read in her face, young as it was—I dare say she conceals her thoughts better now than at fourteen—it was the expression of a merciless, iron will, unrestrained by conscience or sensibility ; and I thought to myself, if that girl should live to be handsome and a rich heiress, as seemed likely, for her brother was always in bad health, I should pity her husband.

“ But, Hastings, my dear, dear boy, I never dreamed that *you* would be that husband. I hope it is not so ; I hope the report that has reached me, that you are always at Beechborough, and are on the point of proposing marriage to Miss Darcy, is false. Now, my son, do not mistake me ; you are your own master, and even if you were not old enough, and wise enough, and clever and experienced enough to judge for yourself in a matter that mainly concerns yourself, still it would be an ungrateful return for all your generous kindness to your sisters and myself, since you succeeded to your poor father's station and property, were I to attempt unduly to influence you in this matter. Should you think fit to marry Miss Darcy, I shall offer no remonstrance, further than by imploring you, my dear, to

be sure that you quite, quite know your own mind and your own heart before you take a step so momentous to your life-long happiness. Remember, Hastings, there is no chain like wedded misery. However, should you decide that Aurelia Darcy is worthy to be your wife, and should she plight her faith to you (and I really have no accusation, beyond a vague antipathy, perhaps silly, to bring against her), I will do my best to love her and to welcome her as your bride. I had hoped that your selection would rather have been Lucy Mainwaring, whom I saw with Augusta and the Squire, two years since, in Switzerland, and who really seemed the dearest girl," &c.

Now, Lord Lynn had a high opinion of his mother's keen-sightedness in the intricacies of feminine character, and a natural dislike, as an affectionate son, to vex his mother by a match against which she had evidently set her heart. At the same time, he was growing every day more and more deeply in love with Aurelia; and he would, not being one of those despicable dangles who waste half a life in the half-hearted pursuit of a prize they dare not grasp at, have proffered his love in plain words, weeks ago, but for one of those curious conflicts of sentiments that sometimes arise in a human breast. Strange to say, that very antipathy to Aurelia Darcy of which his mother spoke, he, too, had felt on first seeing her; he had crushed it down as a morbid folly, but the fact remained. As his eye first rested on Miss Darcy, he had felt an involuntary shiver of repulsion, such as men feel on seeing some beautiful serpent, lithe and deadly, with gilded scales, horrent crest, and venomous fang. This impression had been deadened and conquered by acquaintance with Aurelia, and by all her charms of mind and person. It had faded like the light of a candle, killed by the sun's broad lustrous glare. He loved her. But the old dread and shuddering horror,

dwarfed to the smallest dimensions consistent with existence, still lurked in a corner of his mind, and his mother's fond warnings made him uneasy. Lord Lynn was not one of those men who can love on, even when they know the beloved object to be base and worthless. Such men there are, but, happily, they are few. He was of a different stamp; and yet there he stood beside Aurelia on the terrace, and he looked into her face, that fair, calm, candid-seeming face, with the dimpling smiles about the mouth, and the grey inscrutable eyes that never smiled, and he believed in her, and his love was without alloy of doubt.

CHAPTER X.

NOT IN THE PROGRAMME.

THEY stood long thus. Neither of the two was in a hurry to break the silence. The music from the ball-room reached them in long gushes of sweet sound, and then died away. Outside the house there was no sound except the jarring cry of a night-bird flitting among the trees, now fast becoming bare of their russet leaves. One other sound there was—a faint rustling, such as the wind might have caused, among the laurels and hollies of the shrubbery; but there was no wind.

Aurelia was quite silent, and so was her companion. But silence is very eloquent sometimes, and each of the two who stood, side by side, on the terrace, knew perfectly well that on the other's ear a casual, indifferent remark would have fallen painfully. Each, by some magnetism of sympathy, seemed conscious of the other's thoughts, and yet no word of love had been uttered.

Lord Lynn felt Aurelia's arm tremble as it rested on his own. He was the first to break the stillness.

"Aurelia," he said, and as he said it, he took her hand, "I asked you to come with me here. I had something to say to you. Can you guess what it is?"

No answer. The pretty hand in Lord Lynn's clasp lay quite still and passive. Aurelia's head was turned away. She was gazing into the dark garden, where the lamps gleamed here and there among the trees. The rustling among the laurel-leaves continued.

"I wished, Aurelia, to know my fate; to ask whether the dear prize I had set my heart on winning can be mine. It is not the first time that I have longed to speak as I now speak; but I did not dare to ask, because I felt how blank and wretched the world would seem to me, were I denied. And—it is the old, old story, and is best told in the plain old words. I love you, Aurelia—I have loved you a long time. Can you learn to love me a little? Will you be mine, my very own, my wife?"

The speaker's voice was low as he uttered these words, but it was very distinct, tremulous as it was with emotion. Had there been any lurking spy among the thick shrubs beneath, no doubt Lord Lynn's proposal would have reached his ears; but spies, in the nineteenth century, seldom prowl about a peaceful country-house, and the feeble stir and sound among the glossy dark green of the holly-bushes and laurels, which had been merely such as the passage of some bird or animal might have produced, had wholly ceased.

Aurelia did not answer. Maidenly reserve might perhaps have sealed her lips, and for the same cause her fair face might have been averted. Or this appearance of bashful coyness might have been the merest feigning, the comedy, older than the Flood, played out by generations of artful women at the moment when the lover they had

used every wile to ensnare was brought to their feet at last. But if that last uncharitable supposition were the truth, it was not the whole truth. Supposing that Aurelia, under her cold exterior, felt a thrill of triumph as she heard Lord Lynn tell his love, there was a well-spring of bitterness in her heart that mingled with the worldly exultation of the victory. Why else was the hand that lay in Lord Lynn's so nerveless and chill, that, but for the dainty glove that enclosed it, its cold contact would have been as the touch of a dead woman's hand? Why else did a shiver run through the limbs of the proud beauty as she drank in the avowal of the attachment for which she had schemed and striven? Above all, why else did the one word, "wife!" lowly murmured, and with almost a moan of anguish, pass her lips? Assuredly there was no acting there. For a moment, Aurelia almost had given up her purpose, as she looked down into the gulf into which she was about to plunge. To reach that gulf, she had plotted and fought her way on, now among thorns, now along paths that seemed strewn with flowers; and now she was on the giddy brink, and she looked down, and it seemed that her fall would be among flowers too, and that the leap was a safe one, and yet she hesitated. For one brief instant, her good and evil angels strove for the mastery, and it seemed as though the good might prevail. She had done wrong; yes, but perhaps she had not sinned inexpially; she could draw back, at least, from further guilt.

Lord Lynn spoke again, anxious at her long silence, and auguring ill from it.

"I know," he said, "that I am not worthy of you, except that I love you so much. I have wasted the best years of my youth in idle wanderings, and have made little use of the talents, such as they are, which have been given me. My hope was, that with a home as happy and steadfast as

mine might be, if you would share it, Aurelia, I might redeem the wasted past, and be of some real use to England, after all. But I see I have been dreaming. You do not care for me; you do not think me worthy of——”

“Hush!” said Aurelia, interrupting him, as she turned towards him for the first time, and speaking with quite unusual energy, and in a broken voice that faltered with real emotion—for the most astute of human beings cannot always suppress their feelings; “hush! your words give me pain. You *are* worthy!—worthy of more than—than I can give.”

Quick as thought now came the eager question, the half-whispered answer:

“You do care for me, then? Dearest, noblest girl—I may hope, may I not?”

“Yes! if it will really make you happy—yes!”

And Lord Lynn's arm encircled Aurelia's waist as he drew her towards him, and called her, along with fifty fond names, such as lovers used before Babel rose, his own, beautiful, glorious wife.

But even at that moment Aurelia turned ashen pale, as one who sees a spectre, and starting back, pointed to the garden, exclaiming, with a stifled shriek: “There, there!” An instant afterwards, the flash and report of fire-arms succeeded to that shriek, and a pistol was discharged from amid the dense shrubs below. With a low moaning cry, Aurelia staggered and fell, a white heap of shining satin and glancing gems and bare white arms on which the bracelets flashed in the pale yellow lamp-light. The man to whom she had just pledged her troth was of tried courage, and had faced death in most shapes, and seen dear comrades struck down by his side, but never had he felt such an agony of terror and pain as now. He sprang back from the edge of the terrace, from which he had caught a glimpse of a dark human form bursting its way recklessly

through the matted evergreens, and making for the open lawns. The assassin, whoever he might be, was escaping, but he scarcely gave the wretch a thought; his whole soul was wrapped up in Aurelia's fate. Dead! he believed her to be dead, for she did not speak when he raised her from the ground, addressing her the while in words of the tenderest entreaty, begging for a word, as none could beg but a mother beside her dying child or a lover beside his dying mistress. Dead! Half stupified by the thought, he bore her into the house, meeting numbers of the guests and servants, who came hurrying at the sound of the pistol-shot. He made no answer to their questions; he never stopped or spoke until he reached the ball-room, and laid his fair, insensible burden on a sofa.

Then what a clamour of alarmed voices arose, and next what a hush, a dreadful silence, when none dared, as it were, to speak a word! Dead! surely dead! Yet how beautiful, with an awful beauty she looked, lying there, passive, on the crimson velvet of the sofa, with her haughty head lying helpless on the cushion, her hair loose, and her white face fearfully still and calm. There were stains of blood on her white satin robe, spots of dark tell-tale red on her uncovered neck, and blood was slowly trickling down the white arm that hung loosely down from the edge of the sofa, the rounded, graceful arm, on whose wrist the diamonds glittered still, as in mockery. The oppressive silence was broken by one who had a right to be heard, by poor George Darcy, who came forward, with a great sob grasped the cold hand, and burst into a passion of tears such as startled the by-standers, who had seldom given a second thought to the peevish, unpopular man.

"My only child! my own, one lamb! my dear, murdered daughter!"

A great confusion arose; girls and women were sobbing

and crying in an anguish of mingled sympathy and terror. Men seemed to speak all at once, loud and angry, and shocked, all questioning, but none able to answer, till some one exclaimed: "Let me see her! For Heaven's sake, do let me pass. It may not be so bad as they say."

And the crowd made way gladly for Dr. Gillies, the only doctor at the ball, who had come hastening in from the card-room, where the news had reached the whist-party latest of all.

"Dead! no, not dead. I am sure she is alive. I can find no serious wound. The shot, or slugs, or whatever the miscreant used, have only grazed her neck. She has fainted, that is all."

And the physician's experience was not at fault. The sofa was wheeled to the open window, and the throng of guests being adjured to stand back, the fresh air, and the cold water the doctor sprinkled on her forehead, produced the usual effect in cases of syncope. Aurelia slightly shivered, moved her arm, and opened her eyes with a heavy sigh.

"Where am I? What has——Is that you, papa? I have been ill, I think, and very troublesome, I am sure."

And she tried to sit up, but catching sight of the blood-drops on her robe, said with a shudder: "I remember now: that face," and nearly swooned again, while old George Darcy was patting and kissing her hand, and crying over it, and talking to her as if she had been a sick child. It was not his custom to be demonstrative in his parental affection; it was not until his child had been rescued, as it seemed, from the jaws of the grave, that he knew how dear she was to him. Lord Lynn stood near the sofa, very pale, and with eyes that were riveted on Aurelia, and watched her with a jealous tenderness, as if he feared to trust the doctor's favourable verdict. He had no

avowed and recognised right, as her father had, to tend her in her helpless state, and he feared to agitate her, which in her weak condition might be dangerous. He had said no word since he bore her in, except the one short speech, "Thank God !" that came from his heart and lips at once, as he heard the assertion of Dr. Gillies that Aurelia was alive, and not much hurt. Indeed, the injuries inflicted by the pistol-shot were very trifling, though all agreed that the alarm might well have produced the worst effect.

But now Lord Lynn was assailed by fifty anxious questioners.

"Did you see the man?" "Were there several of them?" "Should you know the fellow again?" "Which way did he go?" "How was he dressed? Had he a smock-frock or a shirt over his clothes? for if so, he's a poacher;" and so forth.

And almost every one busied himself or herself with conjectures as to who the would-be murderer could have been, what were his motives, whom could he have designed to injure? Nobody believed that he was an enemy of Aurelia's, personally. How could a young lady, living under her father's roof, in this our age, have enemies? The idea was preposterous!

"Some cross-grained poacher." "A drunken rascal, bent on practical joking, and loading his pistol or gun with stones or bits of lead." "A ticket-of-leave-man, hoping to rob the house in the confusion." "Some mad beggar."

The last was the most popular hypothesis. It was broached by one of the dragoons from Coventry, and met with immense success; and Lord Lynn was more tormented than ever as he seemed to summon up his reminiscences before replying. At last he spoke, amid perfect silence. All ears were thirsty for his words, and even Aurelia feebly raised herself on her elbow to listen.

“ I did see the man; he seemed to have been hidden among the shrubs, and he made a rush for the lawn. He was dressed in dark clothes. I did not see his face at all; I should not know him from Adam.”

There was a flutter and hum of disappointment among the company. Aurelia sank back with a deep sigh, very like a sigh of relief. A dispassionate observer might have said that she really seemed glad that Lord Lynn had failed to identify the assassin. But there were no dispassionate observers there; even the doctor was in error.

“ You are tired and faint, my dear young lady; and no wonder. The sooner you get to your own room, and to bed, the better. Could you walk with help, or shall we carry you ?”

“ Thank you, Dr. Gillies; I can walk, I am sure. But you make me out worse than I am. It was nothing—only the sudden shock, and I was silly. I never was so foolish before; and I have stopped the dancing, and spoiled everything. Oh, how silly of me!—and how kind you all are! I really beg your pardon, dear Lady Midgett,” said Aurelia, smiling with sickly white lips, and making a weak effort to rise.

“ Oh, dear Miss Darcy, pray, pray, don't. We are only concerned for you; indeed, that is all; and how thankful we are it is now all happily and mercifully over, and no real great harm done to you—and after such a pleasant, delightful evening! Oh, we should never have forgiven ourselves!” Fifty female voices said these words as with one breath; and they crowded about Aurelia, and would have smothered her with well-meant caresses, but for the doctor's stern authority. As for Lucy Mainwaring, she took Aurelia's hand and kissed it, weeping the while. She saw nothing in her but a dear friend, brought back to her by calamity, not a rival. There was no rivalry in Lucy's

heart. But by this time Lord Lynn had rallied his faculties, more disturbed by Aurelia's danger than the keen, tried soldier could have thought possible.

"Get lanterns, gentlemen," he said. "Get some of the horses in the stables saddled; and send some one to the village to tell the young fellows to turn out and hunt down that villain. A large reward, you can say, will——"

"The Home Secretary will no doubt offer a reward—a hundred pounds, I dare say," said Sir Joseph, the county member, looking magisterial.

"I will give the reward myself—not one, but five hundred pounds, to the person who captures that scoundrel," said Lord Lynn. "But talking is useless. Don't disturb Mr. Darcy, but pray, send word to the village, and let us search the garden. The Indians in the Far West taught me to follow a trail, and it is strange if he has left no footprints in the soft mould. Who will go with me?"

"Stop, stop!" cried Aurelia, wildly. "Do not follow him. Pray, let him go. Poor wretch! He is mad, perhaps. It may be a mistake. Do not hurt him. Let him go, please let him go."

"The sooner we get Miss Darcy away, the better," said the doctor, knowingly; "this is too much for any lady's nerves." The doctor triumphed; and Aurelia, reluctant as she was, was removed to her own room; while a number of gentlemen, among whom some young Nimrods of the county vied with the officers from Coventry in zeal, followed Lord Lynn to the garden. The Guardsman had not made an idle boast of his own powers in tracking a foe. He soon found, among the branches of the evergreens, the blackened wadding of the discharged pistol, and near it footprints deeply stamped into the mossy mould of the garden. These he carefully examined, measured, and proceeded to follow out through the course which the fugitive had pursued

when he rushed from the covert. But Lord Lynn, like many another adventurer, was checkmated by the unseasonable ardour of his friends. Had his companions been his old allies, the Big Buffalo, the Black Fox, and other Pawnee or Sioux warriors, or had the young nobleman been alone, all might have been well; but it was found that the Coventry officers and the sporting squires had so trampled the flower-beds and turf, scouring lawns and beating thickets with whoop and halloo, with twinkling lanterns and flaring candles, that Chingachgook himself would have been baffled in such a quest. The trail was hopelessly lost.

"We shall catch him to-morrow. The police will put salt on his tail, no fear!" Such were the consolatory assurances of the male part of the company. The carriages rolled up in a long file, and the guests drove off. The Mainwarings lingered to the last. Lucy, with the hood of her scarlet mantle drawn over her pretty head, came to meet her cousin, her honest brown eyes smiling through tears.

"She is better, Hastings," said the sweet girl, artlessly; "the doctor says she will soon be well now. She has fallen asleep, the housekeeper told me, and sleeps quite gently, like a child, quite worn out, poor thing. I was so glad—so glad."

Lord Lynn turned his own face away from Lucy as he took both her hands and pressed them gratefully. He was very much moved, and he did not wish Lucy to see how much. Perhaps some dim struggling idea was in his mind that he had behaved ill, or at least imprudently, in courting the society of this girl, his kinswoman, as he had done. How she came to him in her unselfish trouble for another! There was no mean jealousy there, neither was there any consciousness in her tone or manner, to tell that she knew why he, of all others, should be interested in Aurelia. There was nothing there but sheer innocent kindness.

How, if she should have taken his attentions for more than they were worth ? How, if——Absurd !

“Lucy, you are a dear good girl. Thank you. Few men ever had such a darling little sister as you are. Good-night ; I shall see you to-morrow.”

And he was gone. Lucy thought of his words hours afterwards, when Chanticleer's faint crow came from the home-farm, and the day was dawning grey to eastward. Yes, he was very kind, and he had pressed her hands, and his voice had been quite trembling, and unlike what it usually was. Did that mean that he loved her ? Or was it only his pity for poor Aurelia Darcy's great danger ? Sister ! Why did he say that ? But he had spoken tenderly ; and Lucy fell asleep again, and her dreams were happy dreams.

CHAPTER XI.

BAFFLED.

FOR some days after the event which had been so near crowning the festivities of the Beechborough ball with a tragic and melancholy ending, Aurelia lay helpless and worn out upon her down pillows, like a hurt bird that has reached the nest only to die there. Not that her life was in any real danger from the slight injuries which the pistol-shot had inflicted. The slugs, five or six of which had been picked up on the terrace, flattened by striking against the wall, had but grazed her neck ; and even the loss of blood was but trifling. Mr. Killick and Mr. Barker, called in to consult with Dr. Gillies, agreed more cordially than doctors often agree, that no bad consequences need be feared, narrow as the escape from death had been.

But Aurelia's nerves had been prostrated by the terrible shock; prostrated to an extent doubly surprising in that magnificent organisation, so firm in health and vigour of body and mind. So it was, however. She, who had scarcely known a day's illness since her infancy, whose serene calmness was a proverb in the household, and whose strong will was recognised by all who approached her, now lay weak and ghastly, scarcely able to converse even with her father, who spent most of the day at her bedside, reading to her, doing his clumsy best to settle her pillows beneath the restless, uneasy head, and quite scared at the change that had come over her.

It follows as a matter of course that Miss Darcy was quite unable to receive any of the visitors who drove or rode over to the Hall to inquire after her health, or even to reply to any of the numerous kind notes and messages that poured in from all quarters of the compass. I think people liked Aurelia better, now that she was thus brought low by suffering, than ever they had done when they saw her in the pride of her youth and beauty, like some deep-rooted column that seems to bid defiance to tempest and earthquake. Certain it is that they were really sorry for her, and unfeignedly hoped to hear of her recovery. Lord Lynn came every day, and even twice a day. Hollingsley is a good twelve miles from Beechborough, but the young nobleman always seemed to have business which took him some miles farther into the country, and he could call at Beechborough on his way back, late in the day, and did so. The servants at the Hall smirked and nodded significantly at one another as they commented on the young man's frequent visits. But his groom could have told them—only that the groom who rode after Lord Lynn was an ex-soldier of his lordship's company of the Foot Guards, and too well drilled into discretion and obedience for such idle tattlings—could have

told them that Lord Lynn's ride extended no farther than a lonely inn at Grove Ferry, three miles off, much haunted by anglers in summer, and that there he put up his horses, and rambled aimlessly along the river-banks, killing time, until the sluggish hours had brought round the moment when he could decently canter again into George Darcy's demesne, and again ask the grey-haired butler for news of Miss Darcy.

Once Aurelia, whose sense of hearing was morbidly sharpened by the condition of her health, heard her lover's voice at the Hall-door, and the ringing of his bridle, and the pawing of his horse's hoof upon the gravel. She sent her father down to speak to him; and it was a comfort to Lord Lynn to converse for a minute with George Darcy, because he had just left Aurelia. For the rest, Hastings, Baron Lynn, led but an anxious, uncomfortable life of it. He avoided his friends, even the Mainwarings. Some feeling, the nature of which he hardly divined, kept him away from Stoke. Lucy waited in vain; he never came; but his chief occupation was waylaying Dr. Gillies, who drove over daily with post-horses from the town where he lived and practised. The young lord was always meeting Dr. Gillies on his return-journey, now on the rushy common at Bittenham, now on the broad flint-strewn road near Redbarns, now on the wooded hill of Nutcop, where many a highwayman had lurked in George III.'s time. The very postilions learned to pull up their nags by instinct, when they saw Lord Lynn; and the old physician's eye always twinkled slyly as he responded to the young man's questions. Dr. Gillies had eyes to see into such a millstone as that of this excessive interest on the part of a man of eight or nine and twenty for a beautiful patient of his.

Miss Crawse came over, and earnestly begged to see her once intimate friend. Her visit was kindly meant. If

Aurelia would have let her in, she would have found that Miss Crawse, softened for the moment, had left Self behind her in her pilgrimage from Patcham Cross Roads. Not a word would have been spoken of Tom's blighted aspirations as a paymaster, nor of Willie's expensive cramming for the Civil Service of his country. But Aurelia would not see Miss Crawse, showed an invalid's petulance and repugnance at the mention of her name, and begged her father to go down and get rid of the tiresome intruder; a commission which George Darcy executed with more docility than tact. Miss Crawse, feeling her well-meant advances snubbed—she had sent up a note offering to nurse Aurelia, and saying with perfect truth that she had been accustomed to be useful and quiet in a sick-chamber from very early days—went home in dudgeon; and Self, that vicarious selfishness on behalf of her kith and kin, which she hallowed as a virtue, resumed dominion over her. She resolved to await Aurelia's recovery—it would be but humane to delay thus far—and then!

Lucy Mainwaring had made a similar offer to that of Miss Crawse. It seemed natural to make it, on the part of those who had known the Darcys well, and who pityingly remembered that Aurelia had no mother, sister, or female relative to be beside her in sickness—only servants, and her father, who was a sorry nurse, for all his affection and sympathy. But Aurelia said No to this proffer too, only that the refusal was more courteously conveyed. She should get on very well, she was sure, with Jennings, her maid, and Mrs. Stark, the housekeeper, an experienced woman. Mrs. Stark was aunt to Jennings, and therefore those two were confidential with one another, instead of being sworn foes, as is commonly the case between two such high feminine officials in a large household.

“I went into Miss 'relia's room,” said Mrs. Stark over

a cup of tea, "and I had my list-slippers on, of course, and was particular careful about noise; so I couldn't be heard, no more than the cat could. And I was close to the bed-curtains, and I heard her talking to herself in a moan, like. 'That face! ah, that face!' That was all she said, but the way she said it made my flesh creep, I can tell you. Then I suppose I gave a start, for she said: 'Is that you, Stark!' and of course there was an end of it. A cur'ous thing, wasn't it?"

"Very curious!" said Jennings, thoughtfully, letting the cambric she was hemming drop on her lap. "I never could make her out: she's as close as wax; but I suspect she has something on her mind. That early walk she took, wetting her feet before breakfast, and never caring, wasn't natural. She's a deep one; but she isn't quite right, somehow."

There were other visitors, however, whom Aurelia evinced a strange wish to see, when once she was sufficiently recovered to go down stairs leaning on Mr. Darcy's arm, and to sit propped with cushions in a deep arm-chair in the Oak Room. Her father did not like her to see the visitors above mentioned, lest their reports and the associations thereby suggested should prove perniciously agitating to her nerves; but she insisted, and carried her point. Some of these visitors wore blue coats, elaborately braided all over the front; others were in blue coats with white letters on the collars, and stripes on the arms; and others were in plain clothes, but had thick Blucher boots, and red cotton handkerchiefs in the crowns of their hats. In a word, they all belonged to the police.

For the first time in his life almost, George Cook Darcy, né Hanks, had had his own way. Contrary to Aurelia's feeble entreaties, he had caused handbills to be posted up far and near, on dead-wall, and barn gable, and roadside

oak, offering rewards for the apprehension of the man who had lurked in the shrubbery, and fired the pistol at Aurelia. He had communicated with the county police, had corresponded with Scotland Yard, and had egged on Sir Joseph to memorialise the Home Office. Her Majesty's Government had offered a hundred pounds for the capture and conviction of the would-be murderer, described in beaureaucratic language as "some person or persons unknown;" and as Lord Lynn's offer of five hundred for the same result was known to the constabulary, every blue-coat in the service of Madam Justice was doing his best to secure the prize. Inspectors, sergeants, detectives, and superintendents, local and metropolitan, came and went, sniffing and ferreting about the country, like hounds on a cold scent; but though several suspicious-looking persons were apprehended, alibis were proved in every case.

It was remarkable with what interest Aurelia listened to these professional persons as they disconsolately related to their paymaster and employer the efforts they had made, and the utter futility of their researches; and Mr. Darcy was almost provoked by the evident pleasure, inexplicable to him, with which his daughter heard of the assassin's continued impunity.

"I always told you, papa, that I wished the poor wretch to go free. He has not done much harm. I dare say it was a mistake. I forgive him from my heart, and I do wish you would let the matter rest."

So she said. Very Christian, and very proper, this forgiving spirit, Mr. Darcy thought; but he was of more earthly mould, and would very much have liked to see the villain swinging in the air, below the platform on the roof of Warwick jail; or, if that were impracticable, at least safely caged for life. But these hopes seemed doomed to disappointment, for one day one of the smartest of the

county police-officers, who had played his part with a sleuth-hound's staunchness throughout, entered the Oak Room. It was evident from the man's face that he had something to tell, and his tale was briefly this. At a place called Grove Ferry, on the river-bank, he had seen some children trying with long sticks to fish something black out of the water, where it was floating among the sedges. This object attracted the policeman's eye, always on the look-out for any seeming trifles that might be of use in his quest, and he soon contrived to draw it out of the river. It proved to be a man's hat, wet and sodden by long immersion, and crushed out of shape, but quite distinguishable.

"A silk-hat," observed the sergeant, telling off the points on his fingers: "very decent sort of tile, but not fashionable; not such as a swell would wear. Maker's name, O'Shaughnessy, Dublin. So the customer we are looking after has most likely been lately in Ireland. We shall write to Dublin, of course, and try to find out the purchaser of the hat, though the number is hard to make out. Perhaps you, sir, or the young lady, may guess who did the trick, now we know the hat to be Irish."

Aurelia, at this appeal, made a slight sign of dissent. Mr. Darcy snapped at the speaker: "Ireland! what has that to do with it? How do you know that the owner of the hat had anything to do with the late wicked outrage here?"

The sergeant smiled contemptuously behind his white Berlin glove. He had seen Mr. Darcy once or twice, and had a poor opinion of that gentleman's acuteness; but he set to work, with respectful gravity, to explain: "I mentioned before, sir, when I had the honour to be admitted, that we had found some traces of the party in your garden, among the laurels where the pistol was fired. The garden

had been so stamped and cut about by folks tramping here and there, looking for the party, that to track any cove there was like hunting for a needle in hay. But there were five very good plain footprints found among the laurels, in a place some way off, where the burned pistol-wadding was picked up, and where nobody had rampaged about as they had elsewhere. These five footprints were all cut carefully out, and carried to the station as gingerly as if they'd been spun-glass, and we divided them. I got a plaster of Paris cast made of the one that fell to my share, and I studied it, and examined it, and spent my spare minutes a-thinking about it, until I felt quite sure I could pick it out of a thousand. There was a particular high heel to the boot that made it, a high heel and a thinnish sole; French-made boots, I reckon; but that any charity-boy could have made out for himself. What I did notice was, that the heel was a good deal worn away on one side, and yet the boot wasn't trodden out of shape, as often happens. I should guess that the party it belonged to had a trick of drumming on the ground with his foot, bringing the heel down upon a stone or a block of wood, or what not, while he was thinking, or talking, or——”

Aurelia made a slight but abrupt motion forwards, a very trifling start; but it was the policeman's business to see small signs, and he saw this, though Mr. Darcy did not.

“ Beg your pardon, Miss. I fancied you had remembered something to give us a clue. Perhaps you have known somebody who had such a habit as that ?”

But Aurelia's voice was perfectly composed as she said that Sergeant Miller was mistaken; she was merely surprised at the adroitness that could extract evidence from such trifles. The active officer swallowed the compliment as a pike bolts a minnow. He bowed, and chuckled before he went on to say that he knew the footprint so accurately,

that when he had drawn the hat ashore, and had proceeded to inspect the moist turf of the bank, low and swampy in that place, he had instantly recognised certain half-effaced marks, leading to the river, as caused by the same tread which had left its impression in the shrubbery.

"The steps went *to the river*," said the sergeant, impressively; "but never a one came back. The chap was not right in his head, we all feel sure of that. Mad or drunk he must have been, for no cracksman in his senses would have behaved so; and though there are plenty of ill-conditioned scamps at liberty, no one could have had a grudge against the young lady, that's certain. Once the superintendent fancied it was my lord the shot was intended for, but that's not likely. His lordship has been half his life abroad, don't preserve to speak of, don't act as a magistrate, nor nothing. The chap that we're after is just mad, *was*, at least, for it's my belief he's drowned himself."

George Darcy was quite shocked. He thought the gallows a fit doom for any man in his right mind who should have attempted to cut short his daughter's young life by a wanton act of spite or revenge. But the idea of some poor creature of disordered intellect making the murderous attempt, and then escaping human chastisement by a self-inflicted death, horrified the master of Beechborough. The sergeant went on: "Drowned! It's the first idea comes into the head of a poor crazy creature in trouble to go and get rest at the bottom of the black water; and it's likely enough that this one did as they mostly do. We got the drags, and we dragged every yard of the river for half a mile or more; and we found nothing. But there came a fresh the day after your ball, sir, and there was rain enough, and flood enough, to wash the body half way to the sea. Most probably he'll never be found now."

"Then you really—think—he is—is dead—drowned?" Aurelia's grey eyes looked larger than usual, and her white face more drawn and eager as she asked this.

Her father begged her not to excite herself.

The sergeant eyed her stealthily before he answered, weighing every word: "Miss, I do believe it; so do we all. 'Tis not my fancy, but the judgment of every one of the superior officers among us, as well as the London gentlemen from the Yard. He's dead and drowned, poor chap."

"Poor wretch, poor wretch! Heaven help and forgive him. Oh, what have I done!" broke out Aurelia, in a hoarse harsh tone, quite unlike the usual soft music that dropped from her lips; and a few great tears gathered in her eyes, and blinded her, to her father's surprise, for she did not weep, as most girls do, easily and for light cause. It took as much grief or pain to dim Aurelia's grey eyes as it does to wring tears from a strong man. Impatiently, angrily, she bit her lip till it bled, and dashed the drops away with her weak hand. "I—was—shocked: it is over now," she said, slowly, and gave her father a look which, for a wonder, he understood; and thereupon the policeman was fee'd and civilly dismissed.

"You have agitated yourself too much, my love," said her father, chidingly; "it was wrong, very wrong. What would Dr. Gillies say?"

"No, papa, for I feel better already. I shall get well and strong very soon now, you will see. I know I am a true prophet!" And Aurelia laughed, but there was no music in her laugh.

Meanwhile the police-sergeant, jolting home in his gig, muttered this soliloquy: "Something amiss with that young lady. A screw loose, or I'm not John Miller. She knows more than she cares to tell. Pooh! that's an old

story with women. Mr. D. behaved decently, though. Ten sovs. besides expenses. We share at the station; I suppose that I ought to pouch half."

CHAPTER XII.

SEEMING SECURITY.

AURELIA's prediction about her own speedy restoration to health was no idle one. She gained strength, as if by magic, from the time of Sergeant Miller's visit. After all, as Dr. Gillies bluntly observed, the hurt she had received was not worth speaking of—a scratch that a few inches of goldbeater's skin might have cured. The true danger was in the violent shock to the nerves; and the old doctor, who was a learned man in his way, reflected upon all he had read relating to nerves, but could not quite account for the complete prostration of so vigorous a constitution as that of Miss Darcy, except by supposing an amount of latent timidity apparently foreign to the patient's nature.

"If it had been Miss Clifford, who screams at seeing a mouse cross the floor, or Mrs. Battersby, whom I had to bring round with ether and spirits of ammonia, when, as she declared, the spider bit her finger, I should not have been surprised. But Miss Darcy! Well, those calm, grand-looking women are sad cowards at heart, after all!"

The doctor was not quite right. Aurelia was not quite a coward. The trifling hurt she had received had caused her little alarm. It was not the pistol-shot that had frightened her thus; it was the face—the haggard, terrible face that she had seen glaring up at her from the dark lair among the evergreens—a face that bore such a likeness to one once familiar to her, as the distorted counte-

nance of a demoniac might have done to that of the same man before the blight fell upon him. It was the face—full of vindictive passions and lurid wrath, full of almost unearthly hate and malignity, livid and menacing. It had produced more effect in its mute threatening, than the actual attack on her life. It had haunted her dreams, and made her pillow uneasy, and sapped her strength, and made every distant sound, even the opening or shutting of a door, even the roll of wheels, appear as the trumpet-call of the last awful judgment. Under that spell of fear, Aurelia had cowered like a conscience-stricken criminal, whose agonised ear detects the far-off steps of the men who come to drag him forth to the scaffold.

But now that face was dead and still, lying under the sullen waters of the slow, oozy river—dead and still, never to rise again, accusing and avenging, on this side of the tomb—never again, until one Great Day, when Aurelia vaguely knew that she must confront that face again, in the pitiless noonday light that no counterfeit could endure, and when the heart should give up its secrets, as the grave its prey. But that day was far distant, so Aurelia Darcy reasoned, and all immediate risk was at an end. She mended apace. Her nerves were braced as her strength returned. There was no more febrile emotion such as she had lately shown. Harder than ever looked the classic beauty of her face; and her old smiles, and her old tones, and tricks of speech, and pretty majesty, were all restored.

Lord Lynn was allowed to see her, and all the dimples about her mouth peeped sunnily forth to welcome him, as she half-timidly held out her hand. He pressed it warmly to his lips. "I have come to ask for this dear hand," he said; "I wish you to forget all that happened on that night, my Aurelia, all but what we two said."

Aurelia's fingers returned the pressure of his. She

looked up at him, as he bent over her, and her beautiful face was dressed in smiles, not all false ones.

"I have not forgotten!" she whispered, and then they were very silly and very happy, as lovers ought to be, only that Aurelia could not *quite* get rid of the one miserable thought, of the one dark memory. Do what she would, she saw before her eyes that wet white face, swollen and livid, deep down under the dark water of the river. But she rallied her courage, and played her part to the life. It was not all acting; she really liked Lord Lynn very much. She liked, not only Hollingsley and the fourteen thousand a year, not only the ancient peerage and high social rank, but Hastings Wyvil as well; though had he been a younger brother, her predilection might have been less decided. However, she seemed to Lord Lynn everything that was good, sweet, and fair. He had suffered so much during her illness that his old doubts—which, after all, had rested on no foundation—were swept away and lost to sight. To him she was the handsomest, cleverest, best of living women. He linked her image with his future life. She was to spur him on to noble exertion, to cheer him in defeat, to be the first to hail his triumphs, should he win triumphs, to be his true helpmate and stay in the course he had laid out for himself as an English peer. And Aurelia listened to his ardent recital of his day-dreams, not without sympathy. Her head understood his motives, if her heart did not.

"He will be an earl," she thought to herself, as she smiled assent to her lover's confident projects for future benefits to be won, not for himself—he had no selfish aspirations—but for the poor and the suffering, by his toil in public life; "I am sure they will make him an earl."

But her smile was as bright and frank as if she had been as much engrossed by philanthropic projects as her future husband. Then in came George Darcy, and when he found

how matters stood, it was evident that if the course of true love did not for once run smooth, the obstacle would not be caused by parental cruelty. It would be untrue to say that the owner of Beechborough had never thought of the possibility of so brilliant a match for his daughter, but certainly he had never considered it probable, or near at hand; and when he learned the fact that Lord Lynn was anxious to place the coronet of a baroness on Aurelia's head, the son of Mr. Hanks could not hide his delight. He was capable at that moment of any absurdity, even of aping the "heavy father" of the stage, with his "bless ye, my children;" but Aurelia did not choose that he should make himself ridiculous, and Lord Lynn's tact soon put him at his ease. An hour or two passed by very pleasantly; and then Lord Lynn remounted his horse, and turned towards Stoke. He had somewhat neglected his relations of late; he would make amends by being the first to communicate, in person, the news of his engagement.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

"IN the name of our Sovereign Lady the Queen, who-soever will apprehend, or cause to be apprehended, the person or persons unknown, who on the night of the 13th of October, in this present year, at Beechborough Hall, in the parish of Holton and shire of Warwick, did discharge a pistol or other firearm, with intent feloniously to kill and slay, shall, on the conviction of the said person or persons, receive the reward of One Hundred Pounds. Information to be given to the superintendent of County Police, at the Shire-hall, Warwick."

The handbill which contained these words, printed in big black letters, and surmounted by the royal arms, lay spread on a block of chalk, while a man, the sole tenant, as it seemed, of the abandoned limekiln on Crowley Down, stooped forward and strained his eyes to read it by the waning light. Crowley Down overhangs one portion of the Blanchminster-road, and from the Danish or British barrows on its crest you can see the white wooden church-tower of Patcham village against the western sky. In the side of the steep hill has been scooped the old limekiln, and it looks neglected and uninviting enough. It has been long disused. The rough road that leads to it, once practicable for carts, is now overgrown with brambles, rank grass, and nettles; and though the place might afford some shelter to the houseless, gipsies and tramps commonly prefer to plod on a mile or two, rather than take up their quarters in a spot where, as local legends declare, a foul murder was done.

Perhaps the man who was slowly perusing the handbill, was too much a stranger to Warwickshire to have heard of the dismal legend alluded to; but, at any rate, he had ensconced himself in the second, or smaller and innermost recess, and was crouching just behind the brick-door jamb, whence the rusty iron door of the furnace had been rudely wrenched long ago, when the kiln was given up. The outer portion of the cave was larger, and had more light; but the occupant of the inner den seemed content to sit in the twilight gloom of his temporary abode, and to peruse the handbill by such feeble radiance as the autumn sun, fast going down behind black clouds, afforded him in the cave where he sat, like a wild beast in its lair. A young man yet, in spite of the forehead furrowed by premature lines, in spite of the sallow, sickly complexion, and the stooping attitude. He was one of those wrecks of whom

we say, with careless pity, that the object of our scrutiny must have been good-looking once. And indeed, if the long black hair, matted and rusty, had been cared for, if the traces of hardship and sorrow could have been smoothed away from the haggard young face, and if the eyes had been less hard and wild in their expression, the wanderer might have been pronounced one whom women might look upon without dislike or fear. But not so now.

Coarsely clad as this man was, in the red flannel shirt, suit of ill-made slops, nailed boots, furred cap, and gaudy neckhandkerchief, which railway-labourers so often wear, neglected and forlorn as his appearance might be, there was still a lingering air of refinement that clung to him even in that rough disguise. That he was an educated person, few observers could have doubted, and his bony hands, with their long flexible fingers, were not those of a navvy, or indeed of any one accustomed to earn bread by manual toil. For some minutes he sat staring at the handbill, and then recovering himself with a start, folded up the piece of printed paper, and thrust it into one of the gaping side-pockets of the coat he wore. Then he turned his head, and began fingering, purposelessly, as it seemed by his abstracted air, a little heap of objects that lay on the floor by his side. These objects comprised, among other things, a copper powder-flask, a loaf of bread, some fragments of cheese and scraps of bacon, a pocket-knife, some morsels of jagged lead, perhaps cut or torn from a window-frame, the stump of a pencil, and a thick roll of cartridge paper. Just beyond them lay a rough stick, freshly cut from the hedge, and to one end of which was loosely tied a bundle rolled up in a common blue handkerchief.

The owner of this incongruous property touched and stirred every one of these articles in turn, and as it were mechanically. Then he took up a fragment of lead, and

with the large blade of the knife haggled and hacked at it, until he had separated about eight or ten small lumps of metal, about the size of swan-shot, and these he tightly screwed up in a piece of paper, and placed in his waistcoat pocket. Next, he took up the loaf, tore off a portion, and lifting it to his lips, along with some scraps of the cheese, began to eat ravenously. But his hunger was soon satisfied, or his mood changed, for he ceased eating as abruptly as he had begun, and, taking up the pencil and the roll of white paper, traced sketch after sketch upon it, listlessly bending over his work. It was no easy matter for even the best eyes to see the fine lines of a drawing in that twilight, but it was evident that the hand that held the pencil was a practised and skilful one. The rough sketches produced were mere outlines, but the stamp of talent was upon them all. Here, a few pencil-marks imaged forth the wild scenery of some mountain district, where the crags seemed to shut in the small lonely lake. There, rose into being the presentment of a half-barbarous village, picturesque and slatternly, with its narrow bridge over a torrent, and its straggling collection of ruinous cabins. But more often the pencil was busy in imaging forth a face, now smiling in its fresh young beauty, now grave and sorrowful, now dead and still, with closed eyes and features at rest for ever, but always the face of a fair woman. There was merit and force in all these sketches, unfinished as they were, but the tenant of the cave struck his pencil across them, one by one, as he turned to a new subject. And presently he tore the paper across and across, rolled the torn scraps into pellets, and stamped on them with his heel, fiercely, loathingly, and as if he were crushing the life out of a dangerous reptile.

Then he laughed harshly, and drawing from under his clothes a canvas belt that he wore around his body, extracted

from it nine or ten gold pieces—sovereigns—and a ring. The ring was a pretty little hoop of pearls, made for a lady's wear, evidently. The man counted out the golden coins, several times over, seeming to gloat over them and to measure out, mentally, the amount of their value. But when his eyes lit on the ring he frowned, and seemed for an instant as if about to set his heel on the costly toy, and crush it as he had crushed the paper. Then his humour changed, and he pressed the little ring to his lips, and kissed it wildly, passionately, as a bereaved mother kisses the tiny shoe, the broken plaything, that remind her of her lost darling. There were tears in the man's eyes, and he muttered incoherent scraps of fond talk, and rocked himself to and fro, murmuring the while. Next, he replaced the money and ring in the belt, carefully readjusted it around him, and untying the handkerchief, thrust the food and the other articles into the bundle, retied it, and, taking up the stick, prepared to quit the limekiln.

At that moment the blackening sky seemed to be rent asunder, and a broad yellow flash lit up the whole horizon, while, after a few seconds, came the deep-toned diapason of the thunder, echoing among the chalk-pits, and the rain dashed down in huge flat drops, and a cold moist wind rushed howling into the cave. The wayfarer changed his purpose of going forth, and sank back into his old place, yet less with the air of one who feared danger or inconvenience from the storm, than as if he looked on the elemental war without as a spectacle that interested him. Shading his eyes with one thin hand, he watched the flashes as they gleamed, now in forked streams of dazzling light, now in sheets of flame, against the swarthy cloud-bank. The rain came hissing down, and lashed the stones around, and the darkness increased.

“In with you, Nick! Any port in a storm!” cried an

almost breathless voice outside; and two men rushed into the outer compartment of the kiln, stamping with their heavy boots upon the floor, and shaking the wet from them like water-dogs on the bank of a river. The tenant of the inner den drew back behind the projecting wall, and sat motionless and silent, after one stolen glance at the intruders, whose eyes, unused to the gloom of the cave, and half-blinded by the lightning, had been unable to descry him. One of these men was Nicholas Brown, the evil-eyed son of the reputed witch who kept the toll-bar on the Blanchminster-road; the other was a little sunburnt man, wiry and active, with the keen face of a terrier. He was miserably dressed in cotton slops, such as many working men wear in summer, but which formed but unseasonable wear for the chill time of the autumn rains, and he was wet to the skin, while the dust on his shoes had caked to mud. His hair was cropped in strict conformity to prison rules, and he was a wobegone object, but his demeanour was bold and brusque, and Nicholas Brown spoke to him with a sort of deference, as if the little man were the more mounting spirit of the two.

For a while their conversation mainly consisted of a running-fire of oaths; but when the clay pipes they both carried were charged and lighted, the soothing influence of the tobacco exerted its effects, and they relapsed into silence. The small man was the first to break that silence.

"You've bungled the job, Nick, that's as clear as a glass of Old Tom, and don't I wish I had it here, just now. A fellow hankers after a drop o' comfort, mewed up with crank and chaplains in that 'ere Temperance Hotel at Wakefield, where I've been spending the summer, and this wetting tops it all. But tell me how it came about. Who blew the gaff?"

"Why, nobody," growled Brown; "the young lady

came over on the Friday mornin', precious early, and we came to terms, mother and her, and me; and if we had any luck the cove would have been stowed snug away, that same night. But he never come back. Went away, after breakfast, and never come back, and left the money for his week's lodging on the table. Never a word did he say to mother, nor yet to Sally, and from that day to this, cracked or not, we never set eyes on him."

The other ruffian took a few contemplative whiffs at his pipe. Then he spoke: "So you told the girl you couldn't do the trick she wanted of you, was that it?"

Mr. Brown rapped out a big oath: "No, that was one of the old woman's dodges. She *is* a deep one. Says she, once we tell the young Miss we're done, she'll draw her purse-strings tight, and what good would that do us? This here hankercher, says mother, was to be sent to Miss as a sign all was serene. Well and good. We'll send the hankercher, and if so be we can collar that chap, we will collar him. If not, we'll just make a pretence of havin' got him fast, and it'll go hard but we net another tenner, says the old lady. Ain't she a deep one!" And Mr. Brown pointed his filial enthusiasm by a fresh oath. His companion waited a moment before he said:

"Did you give Jem the office?"

"No, I didn't," grumbled Nicholas; "'cause why, Jem's in quod. Got into trouble about some linen, off old Dame Medhurst's hedge, like a fool. And the other cove's gone on tramp. So you may guess how jolly glad I was to see you coming along; and says I to myself, Game Dick's out of the Yorkshire stone-jug, and he's the pal for me. So I told you all about it, didn't I, old fellow!"

"Ay, and a good job for you, my lad. You've not got a headpiece to do much good of yourself, and if Mother Brown's tidy sharp, she's spoiled by respectability," was

Game Dick's unflattering remark. "I take it for granted the beggar shot at the young lady, and from that time to doomsday you'll not get a tanner, unless I help you."

Nicholas Brown growled out something about his friend's superior acuteness, and added that he wanted to ask for hush-money; but that his mother, anxious for her good name, was against any attempt at extorting money by threats, especially since no evidence existed. Game Dick took time to consider.

"Young lady's well again, is she?"

"Right as a trivet!" returned Mr. Brown, replenishing his pipe. A slight noise, caused by a sudden motion on the part of the stranger, here reached the sharp ears of Game Dick, who hurriedly said: "Ware eavesdroppers! did you hear that?"

Brown gave a lazy laugh. "Only a bit o' chalk, or a scrap of mortar, maybe, tumbling out of its place. You don't know this kiln as well as we Warwick chaps. Why, there isn't a cadger goes this road would sleep here for a gold guinea, ever since old Sam's throat was cut by his 'prentice and his servant-wench, nigh forty-five years back. They never found where Sam hid the stocking of money, though." And Mr. Brown smoked on, probably meditating on the lost treasure for which so much trouble had been taken, long ago.

All this time the thunder had been roaring, the arrowy lightning rushing across the sky, and the rain beating the earth. But the storm was abating, and its fury had much diminished before Game Dick spoke again: "Nick, lad," said he, "do you ever feel a longing, in your dreams for instance, to have done with the cross lay once and for all, and to be an honest man?"

Words, for some moments, were insufficient to express the stupefaction of Mr. Brown. He broke his pipe, expect-

torated vigorously, pulled off his hat and scratched his shaggy head.

" Bless my eyes !" he said at last, only the word bless is a mere modification for the energetic expletive which Mr. Brown really employed ; " Game Dick turned Methody— Game Dick pattering all that parson's gammon !" And he beat his hat with his broad hand, furiously.

His friend resumed, unmoved by this display of astonishment. " Nick Brown, you're a fool. Which is best off, a rich chap on the square, with his crib and his pair-horse trap, and his wife and kids in satin and silk, or you and me ? I've had time to think, in that jug at Wakefield. If I can get money, off I start for America and begin the world, and no more of this work, if I knows it. Now, if we could get a matter of nine hundred pounds between the three of us."

" Eh ! what ! why, what are you talking about ?" cried Brown, much excited.

To this his more astute friend made answer, that if they could only lay hands, secretly, upon Mrs. Brown's late lodger, they should have the ball of fortune at their feet, or, as the graduate of Wakefield jail termed it, the cards in their own hands. Lord Lynn had offered a sum of five hundred, which government had supplemented by a reward of one hundred, and Mr. Darcy of another hundred. In all, seven hundred pounds might be earned by the apprehender of the person who had attempted the life of Aurelia Darcy.

" Seven hundred pound's not nine. Still it's a tidy lump ; but I'd rather not go into court for it. The coves in wigs do ferret a chap about so. Something awkward might come out," said Brown, ruefully. His friend's answer was cheerful.

" You ninny, you ! You shan't go into court, nor yet see a counsellor's wig. Don't you see how the cat jumps ?

The young lady was awful anxious, warn't she, to get that lodger of Mrs. Brown's hid out of sight? Why so? that's her business; but if she offered you a hundred as I'd offer a pal a screw of tobacco, no doubt she'd pay a precious sight more, or her dad would, to keep things quiet. She's to be married to that young lord, I understand, two months from this, and——there's somebody listening!"

And up the fellow sprang, with a curse, and hurried towards the inner part of the cave, whence a loud and startling noise, caused by the upsetting of a boulder of chalk, overthrown by some incautious movement of the stranger within it, had proceeded. The ruffian could just distinguish a dark form crouching within; but in the next moment he felt the cold muzzle of a pistol touch his cheek, and the quick snap of a percussion-cap followed. The weapon had missed fire, and Game Dick, who was really a bold scoundrel, grappled with his enemy, and a desperate struggle ensued.

"Help, Nick, help! or he'll choke me. He's got his knuckles in my neckhankercher," gasped the thief, gurgling and panting for breath. Then followed a short confused noise of violent trampling and scuffling, and then the sound of a blow such as a butcher strikes in the shambles, and which was succeeded by a groan, and the heavy fall of a human body among the chalk-boulders.

"I believe it's our queer lodger," said Brown, striking a light, and examining the face of the fallen man by the blue glare of the match; "yes, it is. What a lot of fight the cove has in him. Lucky I'd got my nobbler in my pocket." So saying, Mr. Brown thrust the murderous-looking combination of lead and whalebone, facetiously called a life-preserver, back into the baggy side-pocket of his velveteen coat, and ignited another match.

"You've hit him too hard," said Game Dick; "too hard by half. We shall have Old Harry's own trouble to get the thing hushed up, and as for our reward, that tap on the crown has turned our chance into smoke."

"No, no, he's only stunned. But what's to be done now?" asked Nicholas Brown, fingering his weighted "nobbler," as if he thought it a pity not to complete the job he had so deftly begun.

"What's to be done, now, you green gander?" scornfully repeated Game Dick, as he cast a keen glance at the small patch of darkened sky, visible through the low-browed arch of the cave; "why, make all our fortunes, in course. Wern't we ready to hunt this chap high and low, and havn't we got him now, and a bargain too, if it wasn't for the squeeze on my windpipe. Tie your hankercher round his feet, so—now this fogle—fasten his wrists together—better than handcuffs—gag him—that blue rag that belongs to his bundle will do for that, with a bit of stick to keep the teeth from closing—here's some string—all right. Now, we'll carry him down between us, you taking the head and I the feet, and he can't bawl out, even if he gets over that sickener you gave him, before we get him into Mother Brown's cellar.

Nicholas Brown, galvanised into activity by the energy of his accomplice, lent his aid in binding and gagging the prisoner, operations which the more adroit ruffian executed with much dexterity. Still he hesitated.

"It's dark, to be sure, and there's no moon, but we might meet somebody, and perhaps the police. Suppose we're asked what we're doing?"

"Then," rejoined Game Dick, readily, "we'll say it's one of our mates has had a drop, and hurt his head tumbling over the public-house fender. Here's my coat. Lay that

over the chap, and no one can see that we have tied his feet together. Come along."

And as the Down is at no great distance from the turn-pike, and the prospect of gain spurred this precious pair of friends to exertion, the captive, helpless as a calf on its way to the butcher's, was dragged into Mrs. Brown's kitchen, and allowed to drop on the stone floor, evoking a scream from Sally, the girl of fourteen, daughter of William Brown, serving his time at Bermuda in Her Majesty's hulks.

"Hold your tongue, wench!" growled Nicholas, who was but a bearish uncle, and always harsh with his juniors; "get up-stairs with you, and mind you keep mumchance about anything you see *me* do, unless you want your neck wrung." The girl slunk off, and Mrs. Brown came clinking out of the yard, in pattens.

"Lads, lads, what tricks are you playing? Why, Richard Flowerdew—why, Game Dick, *you* here! and what's this one?"

And here Mrs. Brown's voice grew shrill and excited, and she forgot her respectability, and pounced on the prey.

"The lodger—the lodger! Now we've as good as dug up a pot of gold, for the young lady must pay now, and we can make her pay, too, and then there's the guvment reward—but the Squire's daughter will be the best one to trust to, I'll warrant her."

"Well done, missus! Hit the right nail on the head, in a trice, she has!" cried Game Dick, admiringly, while Nicholas smote his knee with his heavy palm, and took a succession of grim oaths that his parent was up to a thing or two, and a regular deep one. But Mrs. Brown soon remembered her respectability, which was the mask under which she lived, and was most anxious to be informed how her son and his friend had got possession of the prisoner, and whether any farmer or cottager had seen

them conveying the apparently inanimate body towards the turnpike.

"Missus, no one saw us," said Game Dick, impressively; "but, I say, this chap's weak and low. Nick hit him very hard, but it was when he was throttling the very soul out of yours truly, and Nick did it for the best. If that pistol of his hadn't snapped fire—but that's done, and need not be raked up. I've been putting my hand on his heart—it's as weak in its beating as a dyin' sheep's, and he can hardly breathe for the gag, and may go off and cheat us. So if them lodgings below ground are ready, and you've a drop of spirits handy——"

The widow did not wait for the conclusion of the speech. She took a black bottle and a glass from a cupboard, seized a candle, and lifted a heavy trap-door, or rather a wooden flap, that covered a flight of brick steps leading downwards to some cellar or pit. A moist air rose from the vault, and made the candle flicker. Nicholas and Game Dick between them carried their captive down the steps, until they reached a large square excavation, dimly lighted by a small glazed window, grated over with iron.

"Hard and fast!" cried Nick Brown, as they laid the helpless form upon a heap of shavings in one corner; "I think he'll not leave these apartments quite so easily as the others. Hard and fast!"

CHAPTER XIV

CROSS PURPOSES.

WHEN Lord Lynn, within half an hour of his proposals to Aurelia Darcy having been accepted by that lady, and sanctioned in due form by her father, reached Stoke, he

found, as he had expected, that the Squire was out. As he had expected, also, Mrs. Mainwaring and her eldest daughter were at home, and with them the visitor was soon engaged in conversation, and doing his best to appear thoroughly careless, high in spirits, and light of heart—the more so, perhaps, because the task of announcing his engagement seemed less easy and agreeable than he had been used to fancy it might be. Hastings Wyvil—he was more accustomed to think of himself under the old name, and the old circumstances, than as the new hereditary legislator and owner of Hollingsley—was a popular man with women; none the less so, perhaps, because his manner, though marked by a certain undefinable tone of chivalric courtesy, was free from awkwardness or shyness, the worst faults, in eyes feminine, that a man can possess; but now he felt awkward, and in a measure guilty, in presence of his kinswomen, and rattled on to hide his embarrassment, laughing and talking much more than was his custom, and watching for an opportunity to mention his betrothal as if it had been a mere common-place, everyday affair, of no especial importance. This game of the concealment of emotions, however, is one in which men and women do not play on equal terms. A woman—who can herself endure torments to which the fox beneath the tunic of the mythical Spartan boy affords but a tame resemblance, smiling serenely the while under the prying eyes of twenty dear female friends—is not to be hoodwinked by the exaggerated acting of a clumsy male; unless, indeed, she be in love, when her naturally fine perceptions will be somewhat confused. Thus it fell out that, while Lucy merely thought her soldier-cousin a little more excited and animated than usual, Mrs. Mainwaring saw how the young man's flow of talk was foreign to what was uppermost in his mind, and that he was manifestly desirous to say some-

thing, but perplexed as to how it should be said. Now, Mrs. Mainwaring had a sincere liking for Lord Lynn, as the chief of her own name and kin—for was she not herself a Wyvil by blood—as a gallant, high-hearted English gentleman, whose rank, and fortune, and character combined to render him most eligible as a son-in-law. In spite of occasional qualms of doubt, Mrs. Mainwaring firmly believed in Lord Lynn's attachment to Lucy. A mother, seeing the visitor's evident agitation, could not be blamed, under the circumstances, from drawing from that agitation a favourable augury for her daughter's happiness, since she was quick-sighted enough to have remarked Lucy's innocent pleasure in her kinsman's company. Nor need Mrs. Mainwaring be classed among the more mercenary of match-makers, if she suddenly remembered a most important interview impending with the gardener, *à propos* of the geraniums to be kept alive through winter in the conservatory, and left the young folks alone.

Five minutes before Mrs. Mainwaring's departure, Lord Lynn had been fidgeting and longing that she might be called away. He could tell all that need be told, he thought, to Lucy, so much more pleasantly than to her parent. She was his little friend, his sister—he laid great mental stress on that fact—and would understand him at once; young people understood each other by far the best. But such is the sad inconsistency of human nature that, Mrs. Mainwaring gone, and the coast clear, Lord Lynn began to regret her absence, and to feel conscious, in a sort of purblind way, that Lucy might not relish the part of *confidante* which he had so cavalierly assigned to her. And yet, why not? She was a dear little thing, and had been much more disposed to hearken to his tales of flood and field, of prairie, and desert, and yellow Nile, and stormy seas, than he to dilate on the dangers he had confronted; for the Guardsman

was almost shrinkingly averse from anything that sounded like vaunting or self-praise. So she would—she must take an interest in this, the most momentous step in his life.

Off he went with a plunge, like a whale into a herring-net.

“Lucy,” he began, drawing his chair nearer to that in which she sat, busy with her tapestry-work—“Lucy, you and I are very good friends, and cannot help caring, I am sure, for whatever concerns each other’s happiness. I have something to say to you.”

And to help the delivery of that something, the declaration of which seemed to stick in his throat somehow, he took his cousin Lucy’s hand in the old cousinly way, half frank, half playful, and looked into her face. Lucy looked down; her colour deepened; and she could not help beginning to tremble very much, angry as she felt with herself for trembling. But Lord Lynn was blinded by his own feelings—by the absurd sublime egotism of a man who is in love, and he saw nothing. On he went.

“When I came here to-day, I meant to speak what was on my mind before your mother, Lucy dear, and put things in a clear light; but I could not get the words out. So I was not sorry when Mrs. Mainwaring went, because then I could tell you all about it; and I knew you would be glad, or at least” (for here some instinct seemed to intervene and warn the speaker he was wrong)—“at least, for my sake, you would be interested in what I have decided to do.”

Lucy did not say a word; she sat with burning cheeks and downcast eyes, listening for more; her little hand in Lord Lynn’s grasp was hot and cold by turns, and it trembled like a frightened bird. She was not to blame if she misconstrued his meaning; Mrs. Mainwaring, bustling among her flower-pots, and pluming herself on her tact in

leaving the supposed admiring swain to pour his sighs into the ear of the beloved object, was in exactly the same error.

“Marriage is a serious thing, a serious step, I mean, for a man to take, and I have not been hasty in making my mind up,” Lord Lynn blundered on; “but I am fairly in love at last—don’t laugh at me for confessing it—and in love, I am sure, with the only woman I ever saw with whom I could be thoroughly happy, who realises everything I could have dreamed of—beautiful, good, clever, talented beyond any girl I ever met—much too pretty and much too clever for——”

“Oh no, no, no!” murmured Lucy, softly, but without looking up—“not clever at all, Hastings. I wish——”

And here she stopped short. There was not a doubt, not the shadow of a misgiving, in Lucy’s mind; but the remembrance that the proprieties forbade a young lady to give herself before she had been asked in plain words, put a padlock on her lips. She had nearly been startled into a modest disclaimer of the extravagant laudations which her lover seemed to be heaping upon her. Pretty she was, and good she tried to be, succeeding well enough to satisfy every one but herself; but she was not by any means a genius or brilliantly accomplished, and she could not help entering her simple protest against such undeserved praise, sweet as praise was from the man she loved. She stopped, blushing like a rose, and averted her face. Lord Lynn was too much taken up with his own ideas to interpret the gesture aright.

“Not clever at all!” he exclaimed, almost angrily; “my dear Lucy, where are your eyes that you cannot see what all the world sees, except you? But you *must* know that she is as wise and gifted as she is lovely, you who have been so much in her company. This is some silly girlish

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pique or quarrel, of which I thought too well of my little sister to have believed her capable, between you and Aurelia Darcy, which causes——”

Lucy started with a quick convulsive motion, as if she had been stung by a wasp, and she snatched her hand away from him, with an inarticulate cry of actual pain, then turned her sweet crimsoned face, and honest bright brown eyes full upon him as she asked bravely, but with a quivering lip :

“ You spoke just now of—of your affection for—for somebody, and—and is it Aurelia Darcy—Aurelia Darcy—to whom you are about to be married ?”

“ Certainly,” her cousin began ; “ whom else could you imagine ?” but then stopped in his turn, at the sight of the ghastly pain and anguish stamped on the pretty kind young face opposite to him. He saw at last that Lucy was fighting with an overpowering grief and agitation, that her blushes had given place to a blanched paleness, and that her sweet little face was quite drawn, and pinched, and wan with a great suffering, while her breath came in gasps. Then she hid her face like a true woman, and in an agony of sorrow, shame, misery, blinded by tears, and stifled by sobs, hurried out of the room.

Lord Lynn sprang from his chair. “ Lucy,” he cried ; “ Lucy, you crying, dear ! I never meant——”

And he tried to catch her hand, but she shrank from him and passed out, and he was left alone. He paced the room, much perturbed. The brave gentleman felt as much ashamed as if he had been doing something cowardly and base. He would have given much, very much indeed, that this had never been. He was no coxcomb to fancy all women in love with him, but Lucy's reception of his tidings could admit of but one solution. And his own accursed idiotic blundering, he thought, had brought this about.

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He had never intended this. He had fondly thought that he might establish Lucy Mainwaring on the footing of a dear sister, and that she would never feel aught but brotherly affection for him. He forgot that cousins are not sisters, and that we have no right to think we can set nature at defiance by our self-constituted relationships. To be sure, he had sometimes thought of Lucy as his possible wife; but then, man-like, he had fancied that the initiative belonged exclusively to himself, and that until he should choose to transform himself into a lover, Lucy's imagination must remain inert. He had never chosen to acknowledge to himself that his attentions, his preference, might be misinterpreted, and that he might have won the girl's innocent heart, merely to wound and pain it.

"I wish this had never happened. I would—yes I would——" muttered Lord Lynn, pacing fiercely to and fro, angry with himself, remorseful, cut to the heart at the stab he had given to that poor little bosom of the good true-souled girl, whose excellence he knew as well as any one knew it. There was no tinge of mean vanity, such as egotists feel at winning a woman's love unsought, to mingle with Lord Lynn's regret. The words he had begun to say, but had checked himself in saying, for boastfulness was more alien to his nature than anything else, were the sincere thoughts that swelled up in his breast—"I would cut off my right hand, if by so doing I could undo the past, and make Lucy forget all."

And at the moment he would have done it, so genuine was his remorse. He walked to and fro. He almost wished he had never seen Aurelia. He wished he had never come home; had gone on as he should have done, had his father lived, to the Far East. He could never be Lucy's friend again, of course; never meet her trustful eyes again—never, never, never. But he had injured her. What could

he do? Should he see her mother, should he explain, express his sorrow? No—a thousand times no. It would make bad worse—turn an injury into an insult. So he left the house, and very sadly and slowly, and with a heavy heart and head, that was never once turned back as of old towards the friendly dwelling he had quitted, he rode away. From beneath her window-blind, Lucy's eyes, dim and dark with tears, watched him as he rode away. He could not see her. He did not know she was looking after him as he went, so she could indulge herself so far, poor little thing. But how she blamed herself for her folly in betraying what she felt. He looked sad as he rode down the avenue, and she felt glad of that, and then took herself to task for feeling glad. He was nothing to her now. He was Aurelia Darcy's betrothed husband. And yet Lucy watched him depart, sore wounded as her simple loving heart had been. But it was not his fault—not his fault at all.

And when Mrs. Mainwaring, bitter in her disappointment and indignation, feeling her daughter's anguish in her own motherly breast, smart for smart, was scornful and wrathful in her denunciation of her kinsman—with whom, however, she had now done for ever, and who did well to marry a Manchester miss, since the artful minx had angled for his coronet—Lucy sat quite pale and still. But when the Squire, much moved, gruffly said that he had “loved Lynn as his own son, and would have been glad to have him as a son-in-law, but not for his title and estate, since if he had been Colonel Wyvil, with nothing but his pay, it would have been all one—before he knew him for a rogue—playing fast and loose with a girl like his, the Squire's, Lucy.”

Lucy said sadly: “Don't be unjust, papa. He never said a word of love to me. It was all my foolish mistake. It is not his fault, indeed.”

CHAPTER XV

A HARD BARGAIN.

"Is your master at home, young man?"

"And what, pray, do *you* want with my master?" thus ran the brief and brisk exchange of query and counter-query on the part of Thomas, Mr. Darcy's London-bred footman, who had hastily donned his coat of state on hearing a sharp imperious peal at the door-bell, and the person by whom that peal had been rung. The latter was a little wiry fellow, about forty years of age, dressed in a second-hand black suit, a bulgy white neckcloth, and a very new hat, the gloss and shine of which article of attire, made the shabbiness of the rest of the raiment more conspicuous than would otherwise have been the case. Thomas eyed this pseudo-ecclesiastical costume with scornful suspicion, identifying it with tracts, begging-letters, forged testimonials, and an urgent appeal to subscribe towards the wearer's passage as a missionary to the Tonga Islands. Nor was the countenance of that wearer much to the taste of the experienced town-bred servitor. For if Game Dick had looked a villain in his dirty suit of slop-shop clothes, smeared with every variety of mud and dust between Wakefield and Warwick, he looked unutterably villanous in his rusty black, with a hypocritical air of sober sanctimoniousness overlying his natural audacity of expression.

"I've particular business with Squire Darcy. Is he at home, if you please?" said Game Dick, shuffling his feet about, and feeling uneasy in his Berlin gloves. The disguise that he had put on was not of his own selection, and he felt awkward in it. As a sporting-farmer, a drover, a horse-dealer, pedlar, Jew-clothesman, or smock-frocked countryman, he could have played his part well, as he had

done in many a taproom and skittle-alley; but this semi-clerical costume which he had donned when outvoted in solemn council of war by his allies the Browns, was one that went against the grain with him. Accordingly, he acted ill, snuffling and mouthing his words in a way that would have disgusted a less suspicious person than Thomas. The latter took a steady survey of the man's cropped hair, restless eyes, and rat-like face, and resolved to get rid of him at once.

"Now, my man, you've no right to come to this door at all, and the sooner you are off the grounds the better for you. I know your little game very well, but I shall not take in tracts, nor subscription lists, nor none of that gammon. Mr. Darcy's not at home, and wouldn't see you if he was; so make yourself scarce, will you?"

All the varnish of Game Dick's affected sanctimoniousness cracked in a moment, and a broad grin replaced it. He had told the Browns how it would be. He was a true prophet; and his superior knowingness being vindicated, he could play the trump-card he held in reserve. Up went one of his gloved forefingers, wagging in the air in that well-known professional style at which he and his like had trembled ever since he matriculated in the thieves' quarter of a northern manufacturing town long years ago. And he winked at Thomas as he said in a loud whisper: "Look here, I'm on duty, I am. I've come from the police, I have, about that job of the reward—that pistol business. Mr. Superintendent Martin told me to keep dark—you understand?" And then came a succession of nods as full of apparent meaning as that of Lord Burleigh in the "Critic."

Thomas was converted in an instant. He saw nothing extraordinary in the man's rascally countenance, now his errand was told. The Servants' Hall at Beechborough

was divided in opinion on the results of the late pursuit after the would-be assassin, and the footman himself had a bet that the hat found was not that of the fugitive, and that the latter had never been drowned at all, but had got off securely to America or elsewhere. And this visitor's cropped hair and vagabond mien corroborated the idea that he was really a spy or agent of the police, which latter body of guardians of order must sometimes work with queer tools, as Thomas was aware.

"That's another affair," said he, civilly—"quite a different thing. I took you—but never mind. Has anything fresh turned up about the murdering fellow?" And here Thomas grew quite eager, for the idea of possessing the talisman of fresh information with which to galvanise the servants of Beechborough quite overthrew his equanimity.

But Game Dick shook his head. "I'm sworn not to let out nothing, and it's as much as my place is worth, young man, to blab a word of the superintendent's business. One thing I *will* say: we know what we know, and queer things may come out, so don't you be surprised if there's a grand trial in the papers, and artist coves coming down to take the picter of Beechborough Hall. I can't wait. Is the governor in?"

"No, he really isn't. He's gone in the brougham to Sir Joseph's," was the answer.

Game Dick affected great disappointment, although no one could have been better aware of Mr. Darcy's absence from home than he, considering that he had lain hid for hours among the larches of the plantation, with his keen eyes ever on the gravel-drive. However, he recovered himself, and asked if Miss Darcy were at home, and if so, whether she would condescend to see Brown, sent by Superintendent Martin. Dick Flowerdew used the name of Brown as being known to Aurelia, and Thomas doing the errand

without much hesitation, came back to usher the emissary of the police into Aurelia's presence.

Miss Darcy stood, sternly beautiful, beside one of the windows of the Pink Drawing-room, and Game Dick, who had heard her described but had never seen her, winced somewhat as his saucy eyes drooped before the calm pride in her gaze. His experience of women comprised many varieties of character, but never had he seen one like this, and for a moment he wished he had not volunteered to be the spokesman of the gang; but he was committed now, and must go through with it. Aurelia, on the other hand, was also surprised. The name of Brown had misled her, and now she scarcely knew what to think. The man's face was that of a knave, but perhaps he was merely one of the inferior myrmidons of the law, and had come to relate some discovery.

"Mr. Darcy, as the servant has told you, is from home. If you have any message I will receive it. You come, I am told, from the police?"

Ordinary words these, but as Game Dick heard them, he felt almost as uncomfortable as if the placid passionless voice had been that of My Lord Judge in ermine and scarlet, passing sentence on Richard Flowerdew, prisoner at the bar. Still he looked up, and said doggedly: "I come from Nanny Brown's turnpike on the Blanchminster-road. My name isn't Brown. I don't belong to the police. I come for your good, Miss, if so be you'll hearken to reason."

"For my good?" Aurelia smiled as she spoke, but it was a freezing smile, and her hand moved towards a little silver hand-bell among the books and knick-knacks on the table beside her, while her eyes were as cold and hard as steel. Men of Game Dick's class are used to violence, to threats, and to abuse, and are thick-skinned to all these

modes of treatment. But cool polished scorn, that contemptuous indifference which the French call *morgue*, crows them. The ex-inmate of Wakefield jail was less happy in Aurelia's presence than he would have been if that very police superintendent, with whose name he had made free, had grasped his collar in the queen's name. Dick had spoken to ladies before, to silly ladies, timid ladies, giggling ladies, ladies proud of wealth and station, and his cunning had availed to palm worthless jewellery, or rotten muslins, or stolen shawls, upon them ; but he had never seen any one like Aurelia, and now he felt himself about to be dismissed empty-handed. He rallied his courage. He would have risked his liberty, his very life, sooner than be balked of this chance of competence.

"Perhaps you would prefer to give your message to the butler," Aurelia said, and her fingers closed upon the embossed handle of the bell, but her eyes never for a moment wandered from the weather-beaten face of Game Dick. She did not know his purpose, but she suspected it, and to suspect was enough to call all her resources into play. She, who did nothing idly, knew well that her best chance of taming the evil spirits that she had evoked, was to maintain an aspect of fearless indifference ; but even she felt a momentary thrill of fear when Game Dick spoke his mind thus : "They told me, Miss, I should find you a plucky one, and I expected so to do ; but if you were twice as bold and twice as cool—and I never saw any one take it as you do—we can tell you what you don't guess at. You think the secret" (the man's wily eyes saw Aurelia shrink slightly, and glance towards the door, so he repeated the word), "you think the secret's down among the mud and weeds of the river, never to come up in our time. That's a mistake. The secret's in safe-keeping, it is. We've got, in old Nanny's cellar, where many a good keg of something

stronger than water has been stowed away in years past—we've got something worth the keeping, something for which seven hundred pounds are bid by government, and my Lord Lynn——”

Aurelia's eyes never flinched or faltered, loud and threatening as the man's voice grew. She looked at him as a keeper might look at a wild beast that it was needful to keep in subjection; but she could not prevent her lips from getting quite dry and bloodless as she put the question: “Alive?”

“Alive! What good, else, would he be?” answered Dick, with coarse triumph. Aurelia, never once withdrawing her gaze from the ruffian's face, reflected for a few moments, and then said, in a low, sweet voice, that seemed to grow more and more gentle as danger and excitement gathered thicker around: “Of course, I know your business here; but I know more than that. Seven hundred pounds is a great sum of money, and if you dared to ask for it in a court of criminal justice, you would not be here to-day to bargain with me. You do not dare to claim the reward, and you know it!”

It was Game Dick's turn to wince before that tone of resolute conviction, before those cold, dauntless eyes, before that pitiless directness of speech, so unlike any that he had heard before since he was an urchin thief of seven, and stole sixpenny wares from stall and shop-door; but he instantly began to bluster: “You'd better speak us fair, my fine madam, I can tell you, and——”

Aurelia lifted up the bell, and rang it sharply. There was ineffable scorn in her voice, scorn that even penetrated Dick's callous soul, as she made answer: “Silence, sir! No one has ever spoken to me in this manner, nor will I suffer any one to do so. You think you have me at your mercy, no doubt. Try your power; but remember, that at

the first move you make, you shall be indicted for a conspiracy to extort money by threats. You best know how it will fare with you in prison and in court, and whether it would not have been wiser on your part to let bygones be bygones. The lawyers and the police can find something worth notice in your past lives, I dare say."

These words were said very rapidly but smoothly, and with an expression of quiet, resolute malignity, that altered the expression of Aurelia's face completely; and Game Dick, after a hasty mental calculation of chances, wiped his damp brow with the back of his hairy hand, and made his sullen apology: "Beg pardon, Miss. I'll not speak a word of this sort again, on my oath. No offence, I hope." And then Thomas, the footman, who had not been very far off, came in answer to the jingle of the hand-bell.

"Thomas," said Aurelia, quietly, "ask the housekeeper to order some refreshments for this—for Mr. Brown, who will be returning to Warwick almost immediately. I will ring again." Thomas bowed and withdrew. Aurelia went on unruffled. "You require a large sum, I suppose, to arrange matters on a pleasant footing. So long as you are civil and obliging, I have not the slightest objection to your profiting by what chance has given you; but I shall not pay beforehand, or the temptation to betray my trust might be too great. You are aware, I dare say, that I am about to be married—and to whom? Very good. When I am Lady Lynn, and when the person you allude to is removed to a place where he can be properly cared for, I will pay you a sum equal to the reward offered."

Dick shook his cropped head—"Not enough!"

"Then I add a hundred. Eight hundred pounds is what I offer, nor will I give more. I shall be of age before the day fixed for my wedding, and can draw out so large a sum without exciting remark. That, now, would be impossible;

but I will pay fifty pounds in gold on Tuesday next to your friend Mrs. Brown. I am going over to Blanchminster on that day, and will hand the money to her when the carriage stops at the turnpike. For the rest, you must be content to wait two months, or perhaps three, till my arrangements can be made. Stay," and she lifted her hand with a slight gesture of warning, which was not lost on the shrewd fellow before her—"stay, I know perfectly well what you wish to say, but it is wiser not to say it. You cannot frighten me—you cannot do me a real injury. What do you know of me? I ask. Nothing but this, that I have taken a pitying interest in an unfortunate person, whose relatives I once knew, and whom I desire to be properly taken care of, and to keep out of harm's way, and from the disgrace of a public exposure of his afflicted state. That is all. And remember, I alone saw the man who fired the pistol—I alone could furnish evidence to convict him; and if he be found 'Not guilty,' what becomes of your reward? Go against me, and your reward will be a prison. Serve me faithfully, and I may probably not limit my recompense to the amount I spoke of just now. Are you satisfied?"

Game Dick was checkmated for once. His quick wit enabled him, point by point, to drink in this merciless logic, so cold and clear, so emphasised by the steady look of those fathomless grey eyes, that he could no more read than if they had been those of a sphinx. He made his bow, looked down at the carpet, and uttered a grisly imprecation on his own head if he should do anything in the matter without "her ladyship's leave."

"Then that is all that need be said," Aurelia remarked, as she glided to the fireplace, and rang the bell, not the hand-bell this time, but the one in ordinary use. Thomas did not answer the summons; it was Jenkins, the butler, whose grey head and round-shouldered figure, appeared,

and to the hospitable care of Jenkins the supposed emissary of the police was consigned. Game Dick shuffled off under the butler's charge, Aurelia smiling calmly as she made the faintest possible inclination of her proud head in answer to his duck and growl of farewell; but it was noteworthy that never once, while gliding towards the chimney-piece to ring for the servant, or afterwards, did she cease to look at Game Dick in the same steady manner. When, however, the door closed on the two men, a great shadow seemed to fall on Aurelia's fair face, and to darken its beauty. She looked sadly weary and worn as she turned to the window, and she sighed, not heavily, but with a short impatient sigh, as if her heart were at war with herself and all the world.

"The old Goody Two Shoes' traditions of the nursery are right, after all," she murmured, gazing out at the faded flower-garden and its withered pomp of the dead summer. "One false step, and no more truth, no more honour, no more peace—nothing but cobwebs of lies, and I, the spinner, fearing day by day to see the meshes break and leave me bare and forsaken of all. I wish I could repent; I wish—but it is too late now. I must dree my weird, as the Scotch say, and follow the crooked path I chose for myself. So be it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNWELCOME LETTER.

It is not in human nature, not at least in the nature of an intelligent person of either sex, to persevere in a sinful course without occasional waverings of purpose and cold fits of repentance, or, at any rate, of that sharp fear of ulterior con-

sequences that simulates repentance. And Aurelia not only felt this, as the days and weeks wore on towards the time of her wedding, but also she experienced a sincere, though short-lived and feeble, disgust at the sinuous paths she was pursuing. She was not merely a bold, bad woman. She was not heartless. She could see the beauty of virtue and the ugliness of vice quite as well as the most eloquent moralist could do. Only the thorns that sometimes lie in virtue's road, the hard flints that bruise the feet of human goodness, ever and anon, were odious to Aurelia's idol, self. She was willing to be good, but it was on condition that she should lie on rose-leaves, and have her lines cast in the pleasant places of the world. What she had done, what she was ready to do, if needs must, to screen herself from consequences, had been done to ensure herself the world's smiles and good word, and to keep her own prospect of rank and high position, which to one of her intellect, meant power, unobstructed. But Aurelia lied, Sapphira-like, lied not alone to men and to heaven, but to herself, when she said in her bitterness of soul that she desired to repent, but could not do it. She really desired no such thing, if to repentance were attached the hard, unwelcome conditions of confession and atonement for wrong done. Had she wished, sincerely wished, to repent, it would have been a sign that her heart was softened and her iron will bowed down. But her heart, though it felt pain, was not penitent, and her will was to be broken, not bent. She would very much have liked to lead a perfectly honest life, free from mystery, concealment, or harmful acts; but she was more disposed to murmur and rebel because of the stumbling-block that early difficulties had thrown in her way, than to blame herself for what she had done to rid herself of the burden. Her sense was too strong, her organisation too admirable, for her, in any case, to have been one of those warped and unhappy ones who do

evil for evil's sake. Aurelia never did any one an iota of mischief through wantonness or idle malice, as many a less dangerous person will do unthinkingly. But she had few scruples as to sacrificing whatever stood between her and the object she had in view. And out of this deliberate preference of herself to others, her history grew like a upas-tree, baneful to all around.

All this time the usual preparations which go on in twenty places when the sons and daughters of wealth marry or are given in marriage, went on merrily enough. There were parchment-faced conveyancers, whose vital air had mingled, for thirty years or more, with the legal dust of their cheerless chambers, trying hard to find out possible flaws in the voluminous marriage-settlements to be executed by the Right Hon. Hastings, Lord Lynn, and Aurelia Darcy. There were coachmakers busy with hammer-cloths, the most pliant of springs, the most ingenious of patent axles. Heraldic painters were mixing their colours to do justice to Aurelia's coroneted carriage-panels. Milliners and embroiderers, and who knows how many more purveyors of feminine finery, from the jeweller with his blowpipe and gold and borax, and heaps of little shining gems, and strings of pearls, to the poor sleepless slave of the needle, working nineteen hours a day, were all interested more or less in the Warwickshire wedding. So was the confectioner, planning new ornaments for the monstrous cake in its pure white bridal crust of snowy sugar. So was Mr. Ringbolt, the Leamington horse-dealer, who was for ever bringing showy hacks and high-stepping greys over to Beechborough and Hollingsley, and who did his best for his own pocket by reminding Aurelia what a good horse, lamb-like, yet apparently spirited, was her favourite chesnut, bought from him, and hoping "her ladyship"—he gave her brevet rank—would allow him the privilege of supplying her with such

a pair of carriage-horses for the Park, as no London yard could beat, not at no price.

There was a time when all these things, with the manifold duties of deciding on this, directing that, and making a difficult choice between opposing prettinesses, would have pleased and amused Aurelia. A true woman cannot be absolutely indifferent to fine clothes and glittering gewgaws, and all the elegance that makes a throne for affluence. And Aurelia, despite her powerful mind, was, above all things, womanly. Even now, when there seemed to be a dark shadow between her and the sun—when she felt the weight and clog of her secret, as a prisoner feels the load of his fetters—she derived a certain satisfaction from the costly good taste of the preparations for her bridal. She had not sold herself, after all, without a price. These dainty toys—these whims embodied in expensive materials by cunning artists—these shawls from India and Lyon—these rich stuffs, and blinding embroidery and jewellery, the charge of which weighed on the mind of Jennings, who was quite frightened at the rubies and brilliants under her care—soothed her a little. They were tokens of the high rank she was so soon to wear, more as a right than as a gift.

Her affianced husband was confident that she would lend that rank a lustre, not borrow one from it. Lord Lynn came over, almost every day, to the Hall, and always went away more and more deeply in love with the matchless creature to whom he had pledged himself. His presence acted on Aurelia like a charm. Misgivings, cares, hatred of herself—and she *did* hate herself sometimes as cordially as any Draco could have hated her—all vanished when he came. She laid herself out to keep him fast bound in her chains, and lavished on him all the riches of her many-hued imagination, all the powers of her mind, all the pretty arts and kitten-like playfulness which women possess for the

subjugation of men, and which were doubly subduing when practised by this grand enchantress. Lord Lynn, though he saw Lucy's sorrowing face in his dreams, and though he was sad enough at times, when he remembered the blight he had cast on her young life, was very true to Aurelia. He loved her. He was proud of her. With such a wife at his side, he felt as if he could subdue the world, if need be. He should never be a faineant knight, with such a consort as that.

Aurelia valued Lord Lynn's love, not with blind fervour, but with the sort of appreciation with which men prize a very fine jewel, whose price is in itself a fortune. She was not marrying him because he was a lord, though she would not have married him unless he had been a lord. She was not one of those utterly weak or mercenary girls who at seventeen trip to the altar to swear fidelity and love to a palsied old peer of seventy, till Death (who must surely be groomsman at that grim mockery of a wedding) do them part. But though she owned that Hastings, Lord Lynn, was chivalrous, energetic, brave, not without talents, and as honourable as Bayard—in fact, a dear, good fellow—she could not love him in the romantic, single-minded way in which he loved her. It seemed to her as if something—the romance, the tenderness, call it what you will—had been cut out, or burnt out, or torn away, from her own woman's heart long ago. She could not feel as she had felt, and she was half-abashed, half-proud with a wilful pride, over that apathy that had grown over her feelings, like an unhealthy moss on a doomed tree.

But one thing was noticeable. Aurelia was very tender and patient with her father, and this was something new. She had been used to manage him, almost openly, playing on his weaknesses as a skilled musician on the ivory keys of a piano, and turning him, as the Beechborough Vehm-

gericht of the still-room admiringly declared, "round her finger." But ever since her acceptance of Lord Lynn—ever since it was certain that she should soon leave her father's roof—ever since, above all, George Darcy had betrayed such unsuspected fondness for his daughter, when her young life seemed quivering on the brink of the black gulf of death, Aurelia's manner had changed. She sought to please her father now, not, as before, to mould him to her purpose by hoodwinking him into the belief that he was following out his own conceptions. And as she did nothing by halves, she passed most of her time with him, studying his comfort and his fancies, eager to copy his letters, to set right his muddled accounts, to put order into the chaos of his petty affairs, at the first request that she would "see what she could make" of some imbroglia of lawyers' letters, complaints, and replevins. More than this, she would sit for hours beside him, pleased to watch him as he read the newspaper, pleased to touch his hand, glad to lay her beautiful head on old George Darcy's shoulder, and to look up playfully in his face, as she had not done before since she was quite a little child, and coaxed him to give her sugar-plums. The idea that her father really loved her was quite new to her. She had never before realised the fact; taking it for granted, that in a jog-trot, conventional way, he "liked her very well," as the phrase goes, but not crediting him with any deep paternal feelings till the occasion of the attempt on her life.

"Papa," she would say caressingly, but with a sadness in her voice, as they sat together, "do you really love me so much, dear? Should you be so sorry, so very, very sorry, if—if anything happened to take me from you, early? I did not know that. I wish I had known it years ago."

Mr. Darcy received all this tribute of filial piety, rendered

at the eleventh hour, in a very ungracious and angular manner. He was a true Englishman, ashamed of any outward display of emotion, and was wretched to think of the unmanly way in which, as he was convinced, he had behaved in public, when Aurelia lay apparently dead before his eyes. He was a weak man who had all his life made feeble pretences of being strong, and as soon as Aurelia regained her health, he snubbed her, snapped at her, and contradicted her flatly, especially before the servants, on every possible occasion when the mildest difference of opinion could arise. But apart from this necessary vindication of his character, Mr. Darcy was softened by his child's unwonted affection, and he was often scowling at the newspaper when there were tears in his eyes, and when he was thinking sorrowfully how desolate his study would be when this, his beautiful daughter, should be gone to her husband's home.

It was on the very day on which Aurelia, driving to Blanchminster, had quietly put down the window of the carriage, and had slipped a heavy little roll of sovereigns into Mrs. Brown's ready hand, which coins had been received with a discreet "Thank you, ma'am," as if they had merely represented the toll according to Act of Parliament, that, on coming home, she found a letter from Miss Crawse. A fierce, irritable letter it was, breathing suspicion and ill-humour, and with the words savagely underlined here and there. In it Miss Crawse represented, not untruly, that several weeks had elapsed without bringing about any realisation of Aurelia's promises; that her brothers were, both of them, out of employment, from no fault of their own; and that she felt hurt and vexed at Miss Darcy's sluggishness in providing them with government situations. She wished Miss Darcy no ill, and for the sake of old times, was unwilling to speak all her mind, but her main duty was to her own people; and as promises and piecrust were

equally fragile, and fair words buttered no parsnips (which latter scraps of proverbial wisdom Lydia Crawse transcribed in small capitals, with vicious dashes beneath), the ex-companion demanded a place for Tom, at least, on pain of instant hostilities. There was another sting to this letter in the shape of its postscript, which was worded thus: "I have been greatly plagued and troubled about my mother's troubles—money matters—or I should perhaps have been less put out. I dare say you have forgotten it, but I have relations who live in a mean, half-furnished house, in Bail-street, Liverpool, and who are ill and in debt. I cannot help them unless you help me. So, knowing what I know, perhaps you will not refuse the loan of sixty pounds to me—for their use, not mine, mind.—L. C."

Aurelia had not time to write to her trustees, and her own funds were nearly all in Mrs. Brown's hoard just then. She went down, however, and got the notes from her father, and was thus able to enclose the sixty pounds in a very guarded but amicable letter that she returned to the insolent missive of her former friend. She promised to speak to Lord Lynn in behalf of Thomas Crawse. To Sir Joseph she professed already to have sued; but Sir Joseph could not ask a favour from the ministry. A little while and she would pay all.

CHAPTER XVII.

LEFT ALONE.

WHILE Aurelia, dauntless but careworn, confronted the threatening aspect of those coarse agents who had been her tools, and strove to become her masters—while Aurelia Darcy was in a dilemma resembling that of some enchanter

beset by rebellious fiends, eager to tear him limb from limb, and raging around the magic circle, Lucy Mainwaring had her own trials to endure. Her disappointment had been severe; and her gentle, placable nature afforded no counter-irritant in the shape of resentment or wounded self-love, by the aid of which she might forget the smart of the pain she felt in every fibre of her innocent heart. She did not know how dear her cousin was to her until the cruel day came when he was lost to her as a lover—lost even as a friend, it seemed; for Lord Lynn's relations with his kinsfolk at Stoke Park were now of an extremely cold and distant description, not from any fault on either side, perhaps, but because humanity is weak, and not apt to be very just in its anger. It was due to Lucy that no actual quarrel had occurred, for the Squire, the best-natured of men, was easily aroused to a blazing state of choler at the semblance of any insult to a lady of his name and stock, and he had intimated his intention of "speaking his mind" to Lord Lynn. Lucy's entreaties had prevented this, and in the office of peacemaker she had found an ally in her mother. The Honourable Mrs. Mainwaring, when her first wrath had cooled, remembered two things: first, that she was a Wyvil, and that to be on bad terms with the head of the house would be unseemly; secondly, that it would be of the utmost disadvantage to Lucy's prospects that she should be publicly spoken of as having been "jilted" by Lord Lynn. For Mrs. Mainwaring knew very well that the outspoken compassion which young ladies receive on such occasions is usually much dashed with contempt.

Thus it came about that the Squire did not turn his back on his young friend and connexion when they met shortly after; but though they shook hands, according to old custom, there was a restraint in their talk, and each knew that the other was as ill at ease as himself. It was not for

Lord Lynn, however sincerely sorry he might be for the false position in which his thoughtlessness had placed him with respect to those whom he liked so well, to apologise to Mr. Mainwaring for unconsciously winning his daughter's affections. There are some things that a man cannot say, let him be the veriest puppy, and the young lord was by no means a puppy. So he reddened as he took the Squire's stiffly-offered hand, and the Squire reddened too; and both men avoided looking into each other's eyes, and conversed of the weather, and the hunting, and the birds—about which they thought nothing at all just then—until Lord Lynn was in a manner constrained to ask after Mr. Mainwaring's womankind at home.

"O quite well, thank you—quite well!" said the Squire, tugging out his watch, and discovering that he had an appointment in another part of the county town that brooked no delay, and so was going off with a nod of adieu, but jerked awkwardly back again, and said—but said as if the words choked him: "By-the-by, we haven't seen you at Stoke this age. I was to give Maria's love in case I met you, and say so. My wife will be glad—Good morning!"

There are few sadder things than the pretence of keeping up a dead-and-gone friendship for the sake of appearances. So it was in this case. Lord Lynn called at Stoke once, and twice, and thrice. His near relation, Mrs. Mainwaring, received him with forced sprightliness, congratulated him in a very polite way upon his approaching marriage, and made him thoroughly uncomfortable by the excessive pains which she took to entertain him. Those were wretched visits. The young nobleman sat with a hang-dog look on his handsome, kindly face, gnawed his moustache, and spoke little. It was so sadly unlike old times. The children came in, but children are very quick in finding out when

something has gone wrong with their elders, and the boys were shy of their cousin, while Kitty flashed her black eyes at him as indignantly as if she had been a little basilisk, and meant to strike him dead with her hostile glances. Kitty was furious, for Lucy's sake. We may be very sure that Miss Mainwaring had not made a *confidante* of her young sister ; but servants have tongues, and young ladies in their teens have ears, and Kate had heard that Lord Lynn's conduct had been heartless and barbarous, and, in a word, a " burning shame ;" and she let him know by her pouting lip and scornful looks what she thought of him. Lucy never came down at all, was never mentioned by any one, beyond the brief necessary inquiry as to her health, and the brief common-place answer. Miserable visits they were, and in after-life Lord Lynn never liked to look back to them.

He was better off than Lucy, though, as men are commonly better off for consolation than women. If he regretted the sweet friend he had lost, he dearly loved and admired the matchless woman he had chosen to be his wife. In her company he always felt happy ; the hours spent with Aurelia were winged hours. He hardly knew whether his love or his admiration was the greatest ; but he was sure that bright days, and fame, and the praise of the good and great, must be in store for one who entered life's battle with such a partner as she would prove. And yet, though he entertained the highest estimate of Aurelia's talents, perhaps he never thoroughly knew in what her true strength lay. She was well-read ; but there were others of her sex who had twice her learning, but from whose society men fled as from the plague-stricken. She talked well ; but there were other women who dropped epigrams and apophthegms as the fairy princess dropped pearls, yet who were rather a terror than a delight to their friends. Her tact was won-

derful. If a man whom she cared to please had any hidden merit or quality, like a jewel neglected in the mine, she could draw it out, and set it in the most attractive light. Contact with her mind was like the touch of Ithuriel's spear, with this difference, that it was rather the bright and powerful features of the disposition that started forth, salient, than the dark or mean ones. Aurelia liked excellence, if it went hand in hand with strength of will. The mental atmosphere that surrounded her braced while it intoxicated; and hence Lord Lynn never left Miss Darcy's presence without feeling his ambition strengthened, and his faculties quickened into new activity; and in this respect, and because he fondly believed that his love was paid back to him in kind, he was far better off than poor little Lucy at Stoke Park.

Yet Lucy went on her way, if not cheerfully, at least un-murmuringly. She did not give herself the airs of a heroine, as some love-lorn maidens do, or consider herself as emancipated from all ties and obligations, that she might better indulge a selfish grief. If she wore the willow for her cousin, as good-natured gossips of high and low degree were kind enough to say, at least she wore it modestly, and hid it away in her heart. It was very sad, now-a-days, that poor little trusting heart, and had a dull aching pain in it, that its owner never spoke of, but did her best to hide, under cover of patient smiles and quiet discharge of her duties. She never neglected those duties. Her poor people did not become indifferent to her, nor her daily self-imposed tasks irksome, because her young hopes were cankered. She still went her rounds from cottage to school, from the bedside of the sick to the class-room where the chubby-cheeked children were awaiting her, and did her work un-complainingly, as of old. The poor had never known Miss Mainwaring's smile to be more full of sweet pity, her

patience with their garrulous narratives of suffering or trouble more generously forbearing, or her bounty more graciously given, than in those melancholy days of the late autumn.

The echo of the thousand-and-one preparations for the coming wedding reached Lucy's ears, as she toiled in her little daily round of small cares and kindnesses, like the distant sound of festival music falling on the ears of one who lies on a sick-bed; and yet the comparison does not hold good, for the labours of Lucy's blameless life were her safeguard and stay. Had she had nothing else to do but to brood and brood over what might have been, she felt as if the torture would have been too great. But she went on her allotted path meekly, suffering, it is true, but still glad that she could feel joy in drying the tears of others, still knit to others in bonds of sympathy and love, and bearing her cross without rebellion.

It is worth mentioning that after one wild ungovernable transport of wounded feelings, in which, as she thought, she was unjust to her rival, and for which injustice she had craved forgiveness in her prayers, she cherished no resentment against Aurelia. Formerly, while the knowing ones of Warwickshire were in doubt as to whether Lord Lynn would seek a bride in Stoke or Beechborough, or neither, Lucy had suspected Aurelia of a deliberate design to win her cousin's attachment; but now that the worst had happened, now that in London and Paris, as well as in the county, it was matter of notoriety on whom Lord Lynn's choice had fallen, Lucy blamed herself for lack of charity in such a suspicion. She did not, would not, blame her kinsman. He had been a little thoughtless, that was all; but then he was a man, and it was for women to be careful, so the fault was hers. She was not one of those who love to drag their late idols through mud and mire—far from it;

she would not hear a word against Lord Lynn ; and for his sake, and for her own soul's sake, she acquitted Aurelia of the charge of duplicity. How could he, the sole of honour, who had looked and spoken, ah ! she well remembered how nobly, in the dear old times, have anchored his heart on a woman not worthy of him ? Lucy had always been humble. She had never questioned Aurelia's calm, self-asserting superiority ; and she was quite sure, now, that Lord Lynn had chosen as beseemed him. He was lost to her ; but she treasured his past words and looks as something precious in the lonely hours ; and she prayed that he might be happy, and wished him no ill, bore him no grudge, and, in short, did not manifest what some women call a " proper spirit."

Condolence is, nine times in ten, a bitter pill to swallow, and so Lucy found it. To have our sorrows alluded to and sympathised with by those who have no tie in common with us, save lip-service or lukewarm liking, is a trial to the nerves and the temper. It is as if some officious person would insist on removing splints and unwathing bandages, to see if our broken bones had yet begun to reunite, on tearing away lint and plaster, and using the probe, torturing us afresh in the aimless wish to learn the depths of the wound. And Lucy had to wince under a good deal of this discipline ; not so much from those of her own rank—for Mrs. Mainwaring, all alive to the polite skirmishing of society, was ready to protect her from such of the county matrons as chose to drive over to Stoke and see how dear Miss Mainwaring was, after the shameful behaviour of her fine relation, My Lord Lynn ; but she was attacked with outspoken pity in her cottage visitings, and she sometimes needed all the lessons her faith taught her, to enable her own gentle temper to take such speeches in good part. Those speeches, uttered by bedridden old dames, who had heard some garbled version of her story—by toilworn wives,

fighting their way in life with nine children and two loaves and ditto shillings from the parish—or by the buxom daughters of farmers, were kindly meant. There was no leaven of malice in what was said on the damp brick cottage-floors, whatever may have been the case with words spoken in rooms carpeted with Brussels pile and Aubusson velvet. But the poor are not reticent; they tell their own griefs and troubles to all who will listen, and they set down the silence of the rich to heartlessness or pride.

There was still speculation rife on the subject of the attempt on Aurelia's life. In the country, a nine-days' wonder, or what would be such in London, lasts a long time. But conjecture had worn itself threadbare without solving the problem, and the general impression was, that the assassin had either committed suicide, or had been drowned in a rash attempt to ford or swim the deep and weedy river, in the absence of the usual ferry-boat. But rumour found a pleasanter, if a less exciting theme, in the bustle of the approaching wedding, and in the fitting-up of Hollingsley Court, which old-world mansion was in need of much rejuvenation before it should be fit for the reception of so charming a mistress as Aurelia, Lady Lynn. There were people in that part of Warwickshire, as elsewhere, who prided themselves on knowing all about the concerns of their neighbours, and who could tell to a nicety how many van-loads of furniture had been sent down; by which of the eminent upholsterers in London; which rooms were to be in panel, and which papered; and what suites of walnut and crimson damask, of maple and brocade, of rosewood and blue silk, would be placed in the Great Gallery, the "round room," modelled after Ranelagh by a contemporary of Horace Walpole, and the drawing-room that by ancient usage was called "My Lady's." These good people knew, too, what was the amount of Aurelia's jointure, and

that of her pin-money, to a sixpence. They were great upon the subject of the servants that were to be hired, the horses and carriages to be bought, on the resetting of the Lynn diamonds, and the remodelling of the Lynn plate, too cumbrous for modern ideas. They knew exactly which was the town-house in Park-lane that had been selected for the young couple; what was to be the rent, the length of the lease, and the extent of the establishment. Lady Lynn would give four great entertainments, balls to be heralded weeks beforehand by the *Morning Post*, and at which all the cream of London society would be crushed and squeezed and trodden upon in good company. Lord Lynn had engaged a well-known French *chef*, and was to come out in the character of Amphitryon. He was to be a junior Lord of the Treasury, too. That his wife would be a leader of fashion, nobody doubted. Aurelia, though only a baroness, would have beauty and wit enough to outshine half the duchesses in Burke's *Peerage*.

Lucy heard of all these splendours without envying them. Her sphere was a different one, by nature, from that in which Aurelia was qualified to move. She could never have been a leader of fashion in any case—never one of those wonderful women of the political world, the props of a ministry or an opposition, and whose smiles and sugared words confirm waverers and cause defection among the enemy; but she would have made Lord Lynn a good wife. Not even Aurelia could have taken a keener interest in his successes than Lucy would have done. She would have been so fond of him, so proud of him; and in the hour of defeat and disaster, would probably have been a better comforter, a more tender friend, than the daring, far-sighted woman who had outrivalled her, and who saw nothing but shame in failure.

But there was soon a new subject of conversation in that

part of the county: an epidemic—a bad, virulent fever of the dreaded typhoid family of fevers—had made its appearance with the autumn rains. It spread from village to village, with apparent caprice, as such fevers commonly do, but guided, no doubt, by unerring laws, which our sanitary science is as yet too purblind to discover. The autumn was long and mild; and, as the sickness spread, men began to long for the first frosts of winter. The first frosts came, but they did not scare the destroyer away. The malady hung about the village streets, taking some, sparing others, stretching the strong bread-winner on a bed of sickness, culling its prey among rosy children, striking down the busy housewife in the midst of her life-long toil, and dismaying all.

“Two cases of fever up at the Union, I hear,” said Mr. Mainwaring, coming in from riding, with a serious face. “If we can keep it out of Sockhurst, we shall be luckier than our neighbours, Miss Lucy. Barker, the doctor, tells me it’s terribly bad at Patcham Cross Roads—thirty-seven down already; and Killick, who lives there, has his hands full of patients. A bad business; but Patcham is ill-drained—a disgrace to the county!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FEVER AT PATCHAM.

MR. MAINWARING’S report of the condition of Patcham Cross Roads was not in the least exaggerated. The long straggling village was at no time in a state that would have won the approbation of the Board of Health; but in ordinary years it got on with only a per-centage of ague over and above that which the adjacent hamlets could reckon.

The village was a neglected one, and the people poor. There had been works there once, but nothing remained of them but a tall brick chimney, some sheds, and a quantity of slag and scorïæ—nothing but these, and such a portion of the floating population as had proved too lazy, too hopeless, or too improvident to follow the receding genius of manufacture to more northern regions. For one or other of these reasons, a number of ragged families, chiefly Irish, remained behind, leading a precarious life, and eking out the scanty wages they picked up in farm-work by as free resort to the rates as the guardians would permit.

Mr. Killick had often groaned over the state of the place, but his influence was smaller than it ought to have been. Neither the villagers nor Mr. West, the nominal squire, would listen to the doctor. Indeed, Mr. West was an embarrassed man, seldom able to spare more than a few pounds to blanket-funds and clothing-clubs, and groaning piteously over even these quasi-compulsory disbursements. It was labour lost to ask such a landowner as this, most of whose rents were received by a sharp, money-lending firm at Thavies Inn, for the benefit of mortgagees, real or imaginary, to repair houses and set drains to rights. Nor were the cottagers able or willing to execute such improvements at their own charge. They said, as their landlord said, that Mr. Killick was doubtless very right, but that it could not be helped. Then the crash came. Five cases of fever were reported, then seven, and in a few days there were from thirty to forty sufferers under the fang of typhus.

What Mr. Killick had expected, came to pass. The Wests went off, fairly frightened, to the sea-side, at the first outbreak of the pest. Mrs. West, to be sure, left the doctor five pounds towards buying delicacies for the sick, and the squire gave as much for medicines for his poorer tenants; but that was all: they could not stay; and away

they went, leaving the surgeon and the vicar, with their hard-working wives, to cheer the panic-stricken, tend the dying, and do what they could for those whose affliction was almost more than they could bear.

In this emergency, Mr. Killick found a very useful auxiliary in his niece, Lydia Crawse. That young lady had for a long while been in a very snappish and irritable frame of mind, on account of the non-performance of Miss Darcy's promises. She had received two letters from the future peeress—soothing, well-worded letters, but still mere words written with ink on paper, not facts. The sixty pounds that Miss Crawse had wrung from Aurelia, and every penny of which had been faithfully transmitted to her mother, now burdened with the maintenance of her two great hungry sons, and clamorous for help, were facts, something hard and tangible. But Miss Crawse was by no means equally sure that Aurelia's smiling assurance, given when the surgeon's niece had paid a second visit to Beechborough Hall, that her brother Tom's case had been pressed on the notice of the Admiralty, and that Lord Lynn had every hope of procuring his speedy nomination to the rank of assistant-paymaster in some ship actually in commission, was also fact. Rear-Admiral Wyvil was, as Miss Crawse was aware, high in official position, and could probably secure Thomas Crawse the desired post, and even that speedy promotion at which Miss Darcy hinted. But Miss Crawse grew more and more testy and incredulous as time went on, and Tom and Willie remained in Bail-street to share the widow's crust, and could find nothing else to do but to saunter about the docks with their strong red-knuckled hands idly thrust into the pockets of their shabby shooting-coats, yawning over the dreary discussion of their prospects, and in much danger of getting into evil habits and bad company from sheer lack of better things.

Another cause for the impatience with which dark Lydia waited for the price of her secrecy was the fear that the wand wherewith she had hitherto maintained her influence over Aurelia was gradually slipping from her grasp. She had a vague suspicion that her former friend was escaping from the ties, such as they were, that bound her to her *confidante* of other days, and might soon be beyond her reach. Should this brilliant marriage take place before Miss Crawse had received what she deemed her due, who knew whether the debtor might not be borne aloft in the charmed chariot of prosperity, far beyond the power of the baffled creditor ! The contest, if such there were, between a peeress of England, rich, honoured, strong in her rights and in the world's friendship, and as well able as any living woman to use every one of her advantages without mercy or scruple against her lowly antagonist—the contest between Lady Lynn and Miss Crawse—would be a very unequal one. It is true that the ex-companion possessed a weapon, held in reserve as yet, by the aid of which she had been used to believe that she could lay her opponent in the dust as surely as the smooth stone from David's sling brought down the mighty Goliath. But to employ this means of victory was to lose its fruits, all save revenge ; and revenge, even if Miss Crawse had been much more vindictive than, to do her justice, she was, would be a costly luxury. In ruining her enemy, she ran the risk of being herself crushed. Her hopes of profiting by what she knew must depend on Aurelia's prudence, not on Aurelia's downfall or disgrace ; and a scandal could not benefit Miss Crawse, who had not only her own bread to earn, but the weal of her whole family to strive for.

In fact, Miss Crawse was in the difficulty in which thousands before her have found themselves, anxious to squeeze the sponge, but fearing to drain it dry by hasty handling—

eager to secure the golden eggs, but afraid to spoil their harvest by killing the bird outright. She knew not whether it were best to be silent or troublesome, and hence she kept her own nerves perpetually on the stretch. Under these circumstances, the outbreak of the fever excited her rather than distressed her. She was a stout-hearted little creature, and loved bustle and turmoil as the war-horse loves the trumpet-sound; she was an indefatigable volunteer in nursing the sick, and trudged sturdily about the village, fetching and carrying physics, broth, jelly, arrowroot, wine, anything and everything, and finding time to read, exhort, comfort, or scold, as the exigencies of the case might require. She was very useful and active, and won praise from the vicar and his wife, as well as from her aunt and uncle, which last-named relative told her in so many words that she "did more good than half his bark and gentian," while he cautioned her not to knock herself up by over-exertion; to which Miss Crawse made answer, that it was not natural to her to sit with her hands before her, and that she rather enjoyed the excitement of battling with the pest than otherwise.

The weather grew colder, and the fever slackened. There were a good many fresh mounds of withy-bound turf in the churchyard, to be sure, and not a few yellow, dim-eyed convalescents tottering feebly about, with the aid of sticks and friendly arms, and who wanted a great deal more port wine and calf's-foot jelly than Mr. Killick could coax out of the authorities of the Union. The fever was conquered, and was fast being trodden out and extirpated; and the Wests, tired of their sea-side lodgings, had written to their house-keeper to announce their return, when a new case occurred. It occurred in this wise: Miss Crawse, who had worked very hard in the good cause, not from any exalted motives, and certainly not from any mean ones, but because the

Killicks worked, and the vicar and Mrs. Pearson worked, and it was her nature to work, began to feel, now the fight was over, how very tired she was. Hurried meals, foul air, deficient sleep, exposure to wet and cold, these are not calculated to strengthen and fortify the constitution, though they may often be faced with impunity, and often are faced, for the sake of the perishing. But Miss Crawse had an unquiet mind and a conscience that pricked her sometimes, and especially when she lay tossing and restless at night, and she was not so strong as she thought herself.

At any rate, coming back from the Byrnes' cottage, that of one of those Irish families that had fared the worst during the fever, and who had still two of the surviving children moaning under a sackcloth quilt, Miss Crawse felt ill—merely a dull weariness and lassitude, not to be wondered at, after all she had done, and a slight, a very slight headache. Miss Crawse dragged herself home, walking in a slow, listless manner. She crawled rather than walked up the stairs, and dropped into the old-fashioned arm-chair, covered with gaudy, faded chintz, that stood beside her little white bed, with its spotless curtains. She was glad to be there, and gave a sigh of relief. Then she untied her bonnet-strings, with fingers that were slow and awkward in doing their familiar office, and tossed her bonnet on the bed.

“Tiresome thing ! it makes my head ache,” said Miss Crawse, passing her short fingers through her coal-black braids of hair, and dragging them back from her temples with the same peevish impatience as her former gesture had betrayed. She sat quite still for a few minutes, with her eyes closed, but she was not asleep ; her thoughts were busy. She was thinking of Aurelia, who was to be married very soon now ; for Time, that never tires, had brought the wedding-day of Lord Lynn and Miss Darcy very near in-

deed ; and no berth under government had yet been found for Tom or for Willie. Aurelia had sent more money and more fair words, but nothing else. And Miss Crawse, in guessing that her ungrateful patroness was reluctant really to urge the claims of the Brothers Crawse, or to show any especial interest in her humble friend, had guessed very nearly the truth. Aurelia was unwilling to give cause to any one, and, above all, to her future husband, to imagine that Miss Crawse had any influence over her, or that her interest in that black-eyed damsel was other than casual and condescending. She preferred to keep her importunate petitioner ungratified until she should be firm in her new station ; and then—why, then, if Lydia was still bent on her purpose, Aurelia knew very well that two words from a person as fashionable and sought after as she intended to be, would land two such very small aspirants as the Messieurs Crawse on the shelf of official clerkdom.

It is wonderful how often people would succeed better in this world if they were only a little less selfish. This was a case in point. Had Aurelia felt but a spark of honest affection for her old *confidante* of many a girlish fancy, had she honestly begged Lord Lynn to make it a point with Admiral Wyvil that the next vacancy should be filled by Thomas Crawse, and had she cast about among her friends for some one who could have lifted Willie to the modest eminence of a stool in the Inland Revenue Office, it might have been better for her. Had she even trusted the surgeon's niece on the subject of the recaptured prisoner, now in illegal durance at the hands of Nanny Brown and her ruffianly son, the sequel of her history might have been different. But she did none of these things. She went on boldly on her blind way like the doomed in the dread belief of the fatalist, and owned no guide but her own supposed interest.

It was in a great measure due to this conduct of Aurelia's that Lydia Crawse, sitting like one struck stupid in the great elbow-chair by the bed, pressed her hot hand to her hot brow, and said in sudden soliloquy: "Knock, knock, knock, as if my temples were bursting! This is something new. I never have a headache. I hope I am not going to be ill. Ill!—pshaw! I am a goose. I am only a little tired, that is all."

Only a little tired!—so tired that, after a weak attempt to dress for dinner after such easy fashion as the rule of Mr. Killick's house dictated, she lay down upon the bed, trembling, shuddering, with a heavy head, with pulses that beat fiercely, and a languor that was unsupportable. The maid, coming up to say that dinner waited, and getting no answer to her knock, entered the room, and ran down with a frightened face to report that the young lady did not seem to be well, and lay helpless without speaking. Then Mrs. Killick went up, and came hurrying to fetch her husband, who looked very serious as he took Lydia's wrist between his sunburnt fingers, and noted how terribly accelerated was the pulse.

"She has got the fever, my dear. I thought as much. Get her to bed at once. There, there; don't cry; she'll pull through. Never knew a better constitution in my life," said the doctor, and his sound practical judgment was correct as far as it went; but to minister to a mind diseased was beyond his skill, and he did not even know that his niece had anything on her mind. He was from home most part of the day, and when he came home was prone to rum-and-water, and such repose as he could snatch with a silk handkerchief over his face; and he thought Lydia a good, plain sort of girl, with no nonsense in her disposition. She had got the fever now, sinking, as many amateur nurses do, when the disease has been exorcised out of the bodies of

their patients. But Mr. Killick had little fear. The girl would have care and kind treatment, and her constitution was tough, and her courage approved. He knew nothing of her inner life, nothing of her claim upon Aurelia Darcy.

So Miss Crawse lay fever-stricken, but likely to get well. Her aunt was a good nurse, her uncle a shrewd surgeon, and she wanted for nothing. When Mr. Killick, some four-and-twenty hours after Lydia's falling ill, was called away to a distance to attend one of his most valuable patients, old Mrs. Bligh, of Boxted House, who had had a second stroke of paralysis, he confided the sufferer in his own dwelling cheerfully to his wife's care.

"It's all plain sailing," he said: "give her the medicine regularly, as it's labelled; keep the room cool, and don't let her drink anything but the toast-and-water or the linseed-tea. If she has a fancy for anything not bad for her—a book or the *Illustrated London News*—don't thwart her. I shall not be back till lunch to-morrow, perhaps not then."

Misled by her husband's words, misled by his tone of easy confidence, and, above all, misled by her niece's quiet, sensible demeanour, Mrs. Killick indulged Miss Crawse by bringing her an unlimited supply of stationery.

"Please, give me pen and ink, and plenty of paper, for I should like so to write. It is so stupid, lying idle, and counting the threads in the bed-curtains. I should like to write a good long letter; I'm sure I should be the better for it."

So said Miss Crawse; and unsuspecting Mrs. Killick brought her what she demanded, only stipulating that she should wrap herself up, and avoid catching cold; and then Mrs. Killick went to look after her children, and to see into various matters of domestic economy. Miss Crawse seized

the pen, wolfishly, when her aunt's back was turned. She counted out the sheets of paper as a miser counts his gold. She exulted in the doctor's absence, and her own freedom from supervision. Her body was weak, and her hand unsteady, but her mind was clear. All her faculties were concentrated into one absorbing purpose. She stretched out a shaking arm, and drew the table on which the lamp stood nearer to the bed; then she caught up the pen again, and her sloe-black eyes glittered with a dangerous light.

"Let her thank herself for what happens. I owe her nothing, nothing," said she; and she began to write. Her hand trembled, and the characters were ill-formed, but it was touching to see with what great pains and care she did her best to write legibly. She wrote, and wrote, and wrote, concealing the written sheets beneath the bolster of her bed. Then, when at last she heard her aunt's step on the stair, she pushed the writing materials from her, and feigned to be asleep. But when the house was hushed, at the dead of the night, Miss Crawse arose, lit a candle by the aid of the weak flickering lamp, and wrote on, stealthily and fast, while the hectic red gathered in her cheeks, and the damp gathered on her brow. "By the help of this," she panted out, with a terrible exultation, that contrasted fearfully with her ghastly face—"by the help of this, if I die, she will be forced yet to befriend the dear ones at home. If I die! But O that my brain may remain clear, that I may tell all!"

As she bent over her work, and as the paper crackled and rustled as she turned over page after page, it was strange to see how hard she fought against physical weakness and mental weariness. Her strong will, second in strength only to that of Aurelia, drove back the mists that began to cloud her fevered brain, it forced her hot hand to guide the pen, and fixed her bloodshot eyes upon the manu-

script. Miss Crawse was not a pattern to her sex, but she was very true to the one all-engrossing sentiment that was the pole-star of her life. She, who had never known what love was, who had no philanthropy about her, had thrown the whole force of her narrow but fiery soul into the passionate attachment she bore to her own immediate kith and kin. We meet with such zealots now and then among women, people who would wrap a world in flames to provide for their own little Marys and Harrys, for mother and sister, brother and uncle. Miss Crawse was one of these. She had resolved, at any peril to her own health, then hanging in the balance between death and life, to write a clear and intelligible narrative of those transactions in which she had been Aurelia's ally. Armed with this document, she felt assured that her relations, in the event of her dying on her present sick-bed, would be able to dictate such terms to the haughty Baroness Lynn as should enable them to rise for ever out of the slough of poverty. And she only hesitated, when the first few sheets were filled up, as to whether she should take time to write a letter of explanation to her mother, or one requesting her uncle, Mr. Killick, carefully to seal up and deliver the papers, should she die without having leisure to forward the packet to Liverpool. But she decided against this precaution as a useless waste of precious time.

"Let me employ the precious hours well, while my memory holds good," she said, resuming her labours. "My mind is full of the past. To-morrow I will write the letter home, ay, and speak to my uncle Killick. To-morrow——" And she wrote on, painfully, anxiously, though her brain and her eyes reeled till she could hardly see the characters traced by the unsteady hand that obeyed her tyrant will. At last she let the pen drop away from between her fingers, making great blots and smears across the page, and even on

the counterpane, and fell back with swimming eyes upon the pillows, and there lay, while the candle burned down in its socket, and flickered and sputtered out the dregs of its life, in the grey winter-light of earliest dawn. When the servant-girl crept yawning into the chamber, just before the clock struck its eighth stroke, she almost screamed at finding Miss Crawse lying like a dead creature, livid and speechless, with her outspread hands buried in a heap of freshly-written manuscript. She ran to fetch her mistress, and Mrs. Killick was as frightened as herself. When the surgeon came back, he found his patient in a high fever, delirious, restless, burning hot, and unable to recognise familiar faces or to speak coherently.

"Upon my word, my dear, you have looked after your niece to some purpose! If the girl dies, you'll know who deserves thanks for it, Mrs. Killick," said the doctor, with a roughness quite unusual to him when speaking to his wife. "Where are those confounded papers she was writing, and what does it all mean?"

"I put them into the table-drawer," sobbed Mrs. Killick. "Here's the key. If anything *should* happen——"

The surgeon took the key, and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, and then went down stairs to compound medicaments. His face was very grave indeed.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOR LIBERTY.

AT about the same hour at which the slipshod servant maid, creeping reluctantly down from her warm bed in the attic, entered Miss Crawse's sick chamber, to be scared by what she saw there, a prisoner lay watching greedily for the

pale rays of the tardy dawn. The Queen's prisoners—felons and thieves—lie upon cocoa-nut mattresses, under warm blankets, in airy cells. They are well fed, not overworked, and properly cared for by surgeon and chaplain. Their warders stand in more awe of them than they of their warders, and handcuffs and leg-irons are only for the refractory and incorrigible. But this was a captive indeed. He lay upon straw and shavings, covered by a frouzy old rug, and the damp cold of the cellar where he was shut in pierced him to the bone. There were irons on his feet; they clanked as he stirred. It had been an ineffable gratification to Game Dick to fasten on those irons, made by a friendly blacksmith at a not too thriving forge miles away—a blacksmith who asked a fancy price, and no rude questions. The knave and jail-bird who riveted those fetters on the limbs of an honest man chuckled with dry humour as he played his new part. "Turn and turn about," he had said. "Dick a dubsman! What next?" The place of confinement was such as no modern Home Secretary or visiting justices would sanction as fit for the humane custody of even a garotter. It was a very long cellar, with a brick floor, on which grew rank yellow moss and sickly white fungi, with brick walls, and a roof, the rough joists of which were visible through gaps in the rotten plaster. Light came filtered through four squares of bottle-green glass, protected by a thick grating of rusty iron. This dim skylight window was situated at the top of a narrow and steeply-sloping aperture, and a second series of iron bars guarded it from access on the part of anything stouter than a weasel. There was but one door to the cellar, and that was the weighty wooden trap that gave entrance to the vault from the back kitchen of the toll-keeper's house, the same trap which Mrs. Brown had lifted when Nicholas and Game Dick had brought in the insensible

burden of the stranger's body. This door was secured by two bolts, by the near neighbourhood of a yelping cur, always alive to his duty of barking at unusual noises, and by the vicinity of the Brown family, one of whose members, Nicholas, always slept on a truckle-bed in the little shop. It would have been hardly possible for the cleverest captive to force the trap-door, to pass the dog, and to step over Nicholas Brown's bed undetected.

The inmate of that dismal den had very little light. The winter's day was sadly short to him; the nights were endless in their black darkness. His squalid window, in which the iron bars and the bulls' eyes of the coarse glass obscured half the pale rays, faced eastward; but if day began the earlier on that account, it closed early too. Five hours in murky weather, six or seven when the sky was frostily clear; he could reckon on no more; and that was but a period of modified obscurity, of dim twilight. Eyes not accustomed to the gloom of the subterranean could not have distinguished more than the outline of the prisoner's form. When the self-elected jailer, Nicholas or Game Dick, came down with a supply of food, he brought a candle with him, even at noon; but he left no candle behind him, and the solitary creature below spent the long night in darkness and cold.

He had borne his imprisonment without murmuring. From first to last, those who held him captive had never heard the sound of his voice. Obstinate dumb to questions, however coaxingly or threateningly put, apparently indifferent to hardship, and either answering cuffs or ill-usage by a snarl of animal menace, or sunk in apparent apathy, this strange man had seemed below the level of humanity. Those who had him in charge were desirous to keep him alive for their own ends, and would have given him warmer clothing, better food, anything he asked,

liberty excepted, had he but craved for them or shown signs of illness. But he was silent as an Indian at the torture-stake, and never uttered a syllable of expostulation or complaint, but awaited, with bright, patient eye, whatever might befall him. This conduct bewildered Game Dick, who declared that whether the "beggar was mortal deep, or green as grass," he, Richard Flowerdew, could not tell; and for some time Game Dick made frequent irruption, at irregular intervals, into the cellar, examining the iron bars of the window, the trap-door, the face of the prisoner, all in his vague fear of some subtle plan of escape.

But Game Dick tired of this work, and meeting in evil hour with some chums of the thieving tribe, fresh from London, he lent efficient aid in houcussing and robbing a farmer at Heaviton Fair, was apprehended on the premises, and, being remarkably well known to the police, was fully committed to take his trial at the assizes. Thus the Browns were left, not a little to their secret joy, to guard the captive, and to secure the lion's share of the anticipated reward. Nicholas laughed at the idea of their charge's escape.

"The best cracksman on the lay couldn't do it," he said, "let alone a poor cove like that."

But Nicholas was unaware of the weight and power of the motives that impelled his prisoner to a display of secretiveness, invention, and self-reliance beyond the conception of vulgar offenders undergoing punishment for crime. Whenever the ruffian entered the cellar—where a smuggler had stowed away his spirit-kegs, newly brought from the sea-coast, long before the turnpike was established—he found the occupant crouched, as in a state of stupid lethargy, on the straw. But had Mr. Brown paid a sudden official visit to the vault as the early light came oozing through the window, he would have seen something that

would have startled him from his complacent security ; he would have seen the prisoner, no longer apathetic, but alert and active, with a terrible earnestness in his wasted face, in the very motion of his bony hands, huddling closer to the window, and beginning to work. Thus—First, stooping down, he touched the heavy irons on his feet, and, as if by magic, they fell with one clank upon the straw. There was no witchcraft in the matter, though—nothing but the magic of industry and dogged determination. With a bit of iron hoop, that had once bound a cask of French brandy, notched by the aid of a crooked nail till it could do duty for a file, the shackles nearest the rings that encircled the prisoner's limbs had been cut through and through. No easy work. It had taken two days to make the file, nine to cut through the fetters, and the workman's hands had been galled and scarred by the imperfect tools ; but he had never ceased working, save during those hours when a visit from his jailers might be expected. The iron filings had been heedfully swept away, the shackles wrapped in straw, and tied, so as to keep them apparently intact, and a wisp of straw had been swathed round each of the wearer's ankles, as if to guard them from the painful chafing of the hard metal. The chains were still there, but a touch would snap them.

This was but the needful preliminary of the prisoner's toil. That work of scraping away iron, atom by atom, grain by grain, could be done by night. It was some relief, in the long sleepless hours, to feel that every motion of the file brought the hour of deliverance a little, a very little nearer. But the other needful work required light, and the only available light was that which the sun gave so grudgingly through the dirty panes. It was almost beyond endurance to lie, shivering, between waking and uneasy sleep, through the Egyptian darkness of the night, and to feel the

ceaseless gnawing of the one ever-present thought—"Too late! After all that I have planned, done, suffered, the day may come and go, and I may be too late!"

There were times when the desperate wretch was ready to dash out his brains against the walls of his cell; but never in the hours when work was safe, and this was one of them. First, he drew from under his heap of shavings and straw that served him for a bed a fragment of slate, marked with Arabic numerals very neatly cut in it with the point of a nail. This was his record—his almanac. By the aid of this he counted the days as he went on; and at the end of the list, more deeply cut, and larger than the rest, was the figure that represented a certain day soon to come, a day he had learned by mere accident, after weeks of stealthy listening to every scrap of talk that his guardians let fall as they conversed in the kitchen above. Such conversations rarely occurred, for the back part of the house, beneath which the cellar lay, was but seldom entered, and though one of the gang always stayed beside the trap while another descended into the vault, for fear of some sudden ebullition of fury on the part of their prisoner, it was not often any spoken words that had an interest for the morbidly acute ear that hungered and thirsted for tidings, reached the depths below. But at last, as if by chance, the old woman, with a feminine interest in weddings which age and avarice could not quite banish, had said, as she came to meet her surly son passing up the narrow brick stairs of the cellar, after carrying his food to the inmate of that lair:

"The wedding-day's fixed, it seems; it's to be on the 30th of December. She told me so herself when she gave me the bank-notes, as agreed upon, and——"

But here the massive flap of wood was slammed down and bolted; and the noise of the falling trap, and the harsh grinding of the rusty bolts, drowned the rest of Mrs.

Brown's speech. Neither the old woman nor her son had any idea that the information which the former had unwittingly conveyed to the imprisoned wretch below would fall as gratefully upon his ear as dew on the parched turf in summer. Now he knew the worst ; now he had a definite purpose to work out within a definite period. The joy with which he heard the news was strangely mingled with pain ; but he smiled savagely as he finished the list of days he was scratching on the fragment of slate, and cut the numerals that represented the 30th of December deeper and deeper than the rest.

" I shall remember that day," he said, between his shut teeth, and as if the words had been engraven on his heart, like the name of lost Calais on that of the dying English queen, he often started from his fitful sleep, and cried out, bitterly : " The day ! the day ! I may be too late, too late. Oh, will the morning never come, that I may work, work ! "

And he would lie with his eyes fixed on the window far above his reach, waiting for the first cold beams of wintry light, that he might hurry to his self-imposed toil.

His fetters removed, and his little calendar laid by under the straw, the prisoner then produced from some hiding-place a large spike-nail, a short thick piece of wood, and a piece of rusty sheet-iron, all of which lay in the shallow lid of an old basket, and all of which were invaluable to their present owner, as the only instruments at his command. The spike-nail, indeed, sharpened and ground on a loose stone, made a tolerable chisel, such as an artisan would have despised, no doubt, but which to that lonely man was as precious as iron nails had been in the eyes of the rude South Sea islanders when the whites first reached their shores. By its help he had begun a task, the first stages of which were the most arduous and the most liable

to detection, a task almost beyond the conception of Game Dick, who had nevertheless broken prison twice during his career of crime.

Listening, like the hare when the hounds are at fault, and she steals, with ears laid back and clotted fur, along the hedgerow, the captive waited motionless for a moment, and then, apparently satisfied that no interruption was imminent, began his work. First, some large patches of moss that encrusted the eastern wall were removed, but with as tender care as the most zealous botanist could have shown in gathering some unique vegetable exotic. That moss was yellow and dry, while the growth elsewhere was green and moist; and no wonder, for it was kept in its place by a tenacious paste of wet clay, artfully concealed beneath the withering tufts. The piece of sheet-iron, which was knife and scoop, and trowel and shovel in one, soon removed the moss, and laid the brickwork bare. Had Game Dick or his partners in rascality chosen to inspect that brickwork they would not have been much the wiser. The dark-red bricks, the stained mortar, looked exactly like the rest of the cellar-walls; and yet, at the first touch of the spike-nail, out came the mortar, piece by piece, and first one brick, and then another and another, was drawn silently from its place, and ranged on the floor, the chips of dry mortar lying between the bricks to which they belonged, and each of the bricks being laid in regular order, like the parts of a child's puzzle, so that no doubt could exist as to the manner in which they should be replaced when their turn came. Down came brick after brick, until a gaping aperture was left in the wall, large enough to admit a full-grown man on hands and knees. And beyond the brickwork was a dark cavity, whence the marly earth that lay beneath the mould of the widow's garden had been scooped away. Into this cavity the

prisoner crawled, like a rat into its hole, and after again listening breathlessly, pursued his work, skilful and patient as a mole in its underground gallery.

His plan of escape was simple in appearance, but its very simplicity was adapted to baffle the cunning of ordinary knaves and ruffians like those in whose power he lay. Had he essayed to file away the window-bars, to saw through the trap-door, to overpower the amateur-jailer who brought him his pittance of food and water, he would probably have failed, and especially while Game Dick was still hanging about the turnpike. But to burrow a way out, through earth and wall, was a labour that nothing but the most stubborn resolution, skill, and self-denial could achieve; and no notion of such a danger to their probable gains ever entered the heads of Aurelia's agents. They sincerely believed that their captive's mind was too much clouded for a coherent purpose to take root there.

"The chap was always queer," Dick had said on the very morning of his own little misunderstanding with Justice on the score of the robbery at Heaviton Fair—"always queer, and that rap you gave him, Nick Brown, has addled him quite. You hit him too hard; I said so at the time."

But the object of their scornful compassion was as intent upon his plan as the wildest statesman on his master-stroke of diplomacy; more so, indeed, for his whole being, and hopes, and thoughts were all fused into the one deep engrossing fury of his eagerness. For this he was patient, for this he laboured, for this he watched, counterfeited apathy, kept true to his task. Every handful of earth drawn forth from the bank, every inch gained towards the upper air, brought him nearer to the fulfilment of his project. He worked now as no hireling could have done.

He had chosen the eastern wall, because he heard twice

a day the creaking of the stiff windlass of the garden-well close by. It was so near, that well, that he could hear the dull thumping of the full bucket, as it touched the side of the well in its ascent, and the clank of the chain as the bucket was unhooked. The well lay to the east of the cellar; the distance was short; if he could but tunnel, without discovery, till he reached the well, he should be able to escape. The rope was kept dangling in the shaft of the well; he knew that. His quick ear had never failed to catch the sound of its fall and vibration against the slimy walls. The brickwork of the well once reached, once pierced, he could swing himself up by night, climbing hand over hand, and be free hours before his flight would be known.

But hard as he toiled, carrying away the earth in small loads in his basket-lid, laying it on the floor of the vault, behind a pile of loose bricks and rubbish, which made a convenient screen across one portion of the cellar, stamping it flat, and heaping shavings and brickdust over the fresh mould, he took a wrong direction, and missed the well after all by a yard or two. But he had pushed his tunnel very near to the surface of the garden itself; he started sometimes when he heard the smothered sound of voices talking overhead, as he bent, with stiffened limbs and cramped fingers, over his toil; and his fear was lest the earth should cave in suddenly, and betray him to his enemies. One more day, two more days would surely suffice. He had been forced of late to take the precaution of propping up the roof of the excavation with such broken bits of board, and old staves of casks, and scraps of rotting poles as he could find among the rubbish in the cellar; but the day—December the 30th—was so very near now. After all that cruel labour and more cruel suspense, if he should fail, after all! He worked for as long as he dared, and then

with a sigh crawled out of the pit, and busied himself in replacing, dexterously and rapidly, the portion of the wall which he had removed. Every brick was set in its old place, every piece of mortar fitted into the interstice to which it belonged; a little of the green mould from the dampest part of the vault was rubbed over the cracks; and the moss, carefully moistened with water from the pitcher that stood beside a pie-dish half full of broken meat, was fixed with clay to the wall where it had once grown rankly. Then the tools were hidden, the shackles were replaced; and the prisoner lay down beneath the frouzy rug, on the straw and shavings, and crouched and cowered like some animal in a cage. He felt the cold, now that he had ceased to work; he shivered, and a dull leaden pallor settled on his face, lately so keen in its expression. It was not more than an hour before noon. Brown would soon come. He came twice a day. Twice a day or oftener, the captive's labour had to cease till the visit was past.

"It is very cold here and dark," he muttered, "and no friend ever comes. Aurelia——"

He started as if a serpent had bitten him. All the stupor and dull pain that his pinched face had begun to show were gone in a moment; his eyes were brilliant, lustrous, full of lurid fire and resolution. He looked down at his hands, which he had begun to chafe, for the sake of warmth, and saw that they bore the marks of his late toil; those stains he effaced as well as he could, and then, after a breathless pause, felt under his clothes for the belt he wore concealed—yes, it was there still, and the gold pieces were there, safe. His pockets had been emptied when he was first brought in, and his pistols, and his penknife, and his purse had been taken away. There was not much money in the purse—half a sovereign and some silver—but those in whose hands he was were satisfied that he had no

more, and did not search him after they had relieved him of what little his pockets contained. He had the belt yet, and money was power. He knew what he had to do. As he had done before, he must lie quite quiet, and look quite stupid, when his ruffian keeper came into the den. He must restrain the homicidal impulse that coursed through his veins like liquid fire, and bear taunts, blows if need be, without a word. The duller and more torpid they thought him, the better. Perhaps he should not miss the 30th of December. One, two more spells of labour would bring him to the upper air. The 30th of December—yes, he bent his aching brain to think fixedly of that. On that day Aurelia was to be married—he must not miss that day.

“I’ll tell you what it is, mother,” grumbled Nicholas over his pipe, after his morning visit to the prisoner; “that caged bird of ours mopes too much, and he’ll die soon, and there’ll be a pretty piece of work. It’ll come out, I tell you—murder al’ays does come out. You may sniggle, but it does. And they’ll make it out murder, if we bury him here, and the police get scent of it. I don’t want to be scragged, old woman, clever as you think yourself, and I won’t be, I swear that;” and the fellow backed the asseveration by a resonant oath, so loud that his mother started and peered round, for fear some one might be standing near the open half-door of the shop, within earshot. There was no one there, however, and Sally was up-stairs. The girl generally kept out of the way of her rough uncle, who disliked her, and showed his sentiments in a practical manner by kicks and pushes when she came near him. His temper was not improved by the drunken habits that grew upon him. Late as it was, he was unshaved, and his untidy breakfast lay in a heap as he had thrust it from him.

“Nick,” said the reputed witch, scornfully, “you’re but a chicken-heart after all. My lad beyond seas was

worth six such as you. You've been drinking more than you ought overnight ; didn't I have to help you in when you came home staggering, and now you've got the horrors, and serve you right. Let me lace your tea for you ;" and Mrs. Brown extracted a black bottle from a cupboard, and poured into her son's cup something that smelled and looked like gin ; " there, you'll be all right now. We shan't have the chap long. Miss—no need to name names, and besides," added the hag, grinning, " she'll change hers to-morrow, and be called My Lady—told me only yesterday how she'd found a doctor would take the man away, and not bother us by asking a lot of questions ; and he'll come with a carriage next week to fetch him. Drink your tea."

Nicholas drank his tea. The laced beverage made his blind eyes twinkle. " We won't part with him—not till we get every penny of the brass, paid down," said he, smiting the table with his heavy, shaking hand.

" Of course not, ducky !" answered the old woman, with a cackling laugh.

But on the day following that on which this colloquy occurred, Nicholas Brown, who had gone stumbling down the cellar-steps to carry food to the prisoner, came rushing up again, with such a storm of execration as drove Sally, frightened, out of the kitchen, and made even his stout-hearted parent shudder.

" What's up, my lad ?"

" Gone ; given us leg-bail. The bird's flown !" and then came a new volley of oaths. So it turned out. The cellar was empty ; but the gap in the wall, and the tunnel burrowed through the earth, remained to show by what road the captive had gone. Gone he was, and his recapture was unlikely in the extreme. There was no clue to guide the pursuit.

" I wish Game Dick was here !" cried Nicholas, as he

stood disconsolate, gaping at the disordered bricks, the yawning excavation, the shackles lying on the cellar-floor, all the signs that their late captive had been more than a match for the craft of his jailers—"I *wish* Dick was here. I suppose I'd better pad the hoof to Miss there at the Hall, and let her know——"

"Let her know nothing!" resolutely broke in the old woman, who had more presence of mind than her son. "I know her well. Once say we've lost the bird, and we may whistle for payment. Keep it dark, lad, keep it dark! We may get the money after all, if she thinks the chap's snug with us. Mum's the word."

So Aurelia received no warning. Her agents, like their employer, thought of their own interest, and of nothing else.

CHAPTER XX.

STRUCK DOWN.

"Is she dead?"

Mrs. Killick's lips trembled as she asked the question. The surgeon shook his head. They were both of them standing by the bedside of Lydia Crawse, in the dismal grey light and shadow of the December morning. It was a sad vigil. The strong, courageous, self-reliant woman who lay upon that bed of suffering, never to rise again from it, was worn to a mere frail semblance of her old self—a poor wreck, torn and shattered by the burning, wasting force of the disease. She had been delirious, raving, struggling with the kind hands that held her, writhing in the furnace-breath of the fever. But that was over now. Nature, worn out, had sought refuge in sleep. A less-experienced doctor than Mr. Killick would have recognised

the crisis of the disorder. He was glad she had ceased to rave, and had fallen asleep. There was balm in sleep. In his sea-going days, he had known those who were in the fangs of Yellow Jack, or miasma struck off the Guinea coast, to wake up, saved, from a long sleep. But Miss Crawse did not sleep long nor soundly; she stirred and moaned like a sick child. This went on for some time; then she became quite passive, and lay with parted lips and half-closed heavy eyes, and her wasted face upturned, and her thin hands resting idly on the counterpane. She was alive; she was not asleep; but life was at its lowest ebb, and the sufferer's breathing could not reach the doctor's practised ear. Mrs. Killick stood there, crying; her tears were as much those of remorse as of sorrow. She had taken her husband's reproof very much to heart, and felt guilty of her niece's death. What would her sister, Mrs. Crawse, say when she knew all? How careless to leave the poor girl—but who would have thought it! That is the consolation of many Mrs. Killicks in this world, when they have blundered into mischief—Who would have thought it!

“Is there no hope for the poor thing?” sobbed Mrs. Killick, speaking in a whisper, though the report of a cannon would perhaps have failed to convey any impression to the dulled ear of the patient.

“While there's life, there's hope,” mechanically responded her husband, pouring some drops of a cordial medicine into a glass. “She might be better for this, but she has not the strength to take it.—It would be cruel to disturb her.”

These last words the doctor muttered to himself, and then setting down the glass, and observing his wife's distress, he added kindly: “There, there, my lass. Dry your eyes. It's not your fault, after all, and I was hasty to say so. You meant for the best.”

Mrs. Killick shook her head.

"I didn't do for the best, Killick," she replied; "and I shall never forgive myself. If I'd looked after her, she would not——"

"Hush!" interrupted the surgeon, lifting a warning finger, and drawing nearer to the bed. He had detected a momentary gleam of reason in the sufferer's eyes, now open, and gazing at him. It was the first look, since the doctor's return, in which the mind had shown itself free from the mists of delirium. There had been no lucid intervals between the paroxysms, nothing but ravings, alternated by heavy stupor and lethargy. But now the eyes were full of intelligence, wistful, eager. The poor exhausted body lay passive; the head never stirred on the pillow; all life and feeling seemed concentrated in the eyes alone.

"You are better now, my dear!" said the surgeon, in his rough, kind manner, as he signed to his wife to support the sufferer while he put the cordial to her lips. "Try and swallow this, my girl—it will do you good."

Miss Crawse was able by an effort to swallow a small portion of the contents of the glass, then she sank back again on the pillows, and her lips moved and twitched, but no sound came. It was pitiable to watch the tremulous working of those poor blanched lips, to see how the labouring bosom gasped for breath, how the meagre hands pulled feebly at the bedclothes on which the weak fingers had closed, and above all, to see how anxious grew the craving look of those speaking, terrified eyes. The surgeon knew that longing glance, that restlessness of the hands, only too well. He had seen that look in the eyes of stalwart seamen and soldiers, of grey-haired commanders, of gallant lads, dying in hospital or on shipboard under the sweltering heats of both Indies, on the coasts of Africa and South America; he had seen it, too, at Navarino, when he was

but a raw mate, fresh from the Edinburgh schools of medicine, and had been sickened at the shambles in which he had to ply his work on the blood-stained lower deck of a frigate. But always the same look, haunting, fearful. He tried to smile encouragement to wife and patient, but he had no hope left.

At last, by a supreme effort, the dying woman's hollow voice, thin and weak as the sighing of the wind among the leafless boughs without, reached the ears of the listeners, like a message from a far-off world: "Those papers—my papers—those I——"

She panted, and could not speak, but her eyes glanced towards the table-drawer in which the narrative—fatal to her, fatal, perhaps, to others—had been placed. Somehow, in her wildest wanderings of mind, she had known of the spot where the narrative lay.

Mr. Killick understood her at once. "Yes, yes, Lydia," he said, earnestly, in answer to the imploring glance; "I know what papers you mean. What do you wish me to do with them?"

Miss Crawse's breath came in sobs and short gasps now. She glanced quickly, despairingly about her, and then her eyelids quivered and drooped. Then came a silence that no one ventured to break. Without, the December sun, the sun that had risen on Aurelia's wedding morn—for this was the thirtieth of the month—broke through the clouds, and poured a pale yellow light into the sad sick-room, where candles were burning yet. A robin on the branch of a tree that grew near the window sang out his twittering carol with sturdy joyousness; then voices and the roll of cart-wheels began to be heard in the village street. Lydia Crawse strove hard to speak. With eyes that were growing unsteady and dim, she turned towards her uncle, and beckoned feebly that he should approach his ear to her

white lips. He obeyed, but he heard no sound. Only a long shuddering motion stirred the helpless form on the bed, and he knew that Lydia Crawse would speak no more to mortal ear. Softly and reverently, he closed her eyes, and threw the sheet over her ashen-grey face, that should never warm into life again. He led his weeping wife from the room. He turned back, unlocked the table-drawer with the key that he carried in his pocket, and drew out the papers. He paused as he passed down stairs, and, as he uttered some brief words of comfort to Mrs. Killick, she saw the roll of manuscript he carried crumpled in his hand.

“What shall you do with those?” she asked, nervously.

“I shall look them over. I thought at first it was some love-letter, but I cannot believe that now. You saw what a hold on the poor thing’s last thoughts these papers had. If she had given me any instructions about disposing of them, I should have known how to act. As it is, I must look for instructions among the papers themselves.”

Mrs. Killick was a good soul, and under the softening influence of unselfish sorrow; but an impulse of curiosity stirred within her. She glanced towards the manuscript. “Poor Lydia,” said she; “what can it be? Shall I——”

“No,” answered Mr. Killick. “It was to me the poor girl spoke; it was to me she desired to entrust some commission respecting these papers. I will read them and act as I think proper.” And without more ado, he walked down stairs, went into the surgery, and bolted the door. Mr. Killick was master in his own house. His wife was disappointed, but she owned to herself that he was very probably right. He himself had no doubts on the point.

“Annie’s a good creature,” he said, as he sat down to peruse the papers—“a good creature; but she never kept a secret in her life. And if this be some history of grief

and trouble, of shame, perhaps—and, by the poor wench's anxious face, I am afraid it is—it will be just as well that a woman should not know of it. I hope I'm wrong—I hope I am. But if I can execute the poor thing's wishes, and yet spare her memory, I will. Now for it." And he began to read. At first his eye ranged almost indifferently over the crabbed characters, but presently his shaggy eyebrows contracted into a heavy frown, and the blood mounted to his forehead, as he read earnestly on. The history that he read ran thus.

CHAPTER XXI.

MISS CRAWSE'S NARRATIVE.

"I WILL not call on Heaven to bear witness that what I am about to write is the plain truth ; I will do what to my mind is worth more—I will substantiate the more important points in this history by such proofs as I, writing on a bed of sickness, and perhaps of death, am able to supply ; and when I cannot furnish proofs, at least I will set down every event as it occurred, without fear and without favour. I have not the slightest desire to palliate or gloss over my own share in the transactions which I am about to divulge. Let those who may learn the facts, judge Lydia Crawse as harshly as they please. Before the words of her confession come under their knowledge, the writer will have passed before another and a more dread tribunal than that of mortals. Her only object is to tell a straightforward tale of the events in which she has played a part, and from which she has herself reaped neither pleasure nor profit. For the sake of others she does so.

"Three years and a half ago, in the month of April, 1856, I entered the employment of an invalid lady of rank,

residing in the north of Ireland. This lady's name was Lady Harriet Ogle, daughter of the late Earl of Warrenton, and widow of the Right Honourable Colonel Sir Philip Ogle, of Rathglas Priory. Sir Philip, whose estates were unentailed, had left Lady Harriet mistress of his extensive property for her life only, after which, it passed to distant relatives. Her ladyship lived, and still lives, at Rathglas Priory, in the parish of Rathermine, eight miles from Ogletown, where the assizes are held. Most of the houses in Ogletown, as well as the lands between the Priory and the town itself, belong to Lady Harriet, and she receives a very large revenue, at least twenty thousand a year, from these lands. I had heard of all this wealth and grandeur, and as wealth was in my mind inseparably connected with gaiety and splendour of living, I was very thankful and pleased to become paid companion to My Lady Harriet.

"I soon found out my mistake. Lady Harriet Ogle was an invalid and a cripple, very parsimonious, and of a whimsical, tart disposition. She saw little or no company. Her household was a frugal one for a lady of her quality and her great means. She saved, as I used to fancy, from mere instinct; but she saved whenever she could, and her fine house was as dull as a nunnery. I was very miserable at first, and should have been glad to throw up this, my first situation, and return to Liverpool to my mother's humble little dwelling. But I forbore to do so, for two reasons. In the first place, my dear mother was poor, and my elder sister had been in bad health always, and I wanted to help them, not to burden their scanty income with another mouth to feed. The second reason was, that I was allowed a great deal of time to myself, and a great deal more liberty than usually falls to the lot of a paid companion. This was not because Lady Harriet was indulgent; it was because she did not trouble her head about me or my occupations, so

long as she received from me the services she required. It was my duty to write letters from her dictation, to match her worsteds, to ground her tapestry-work, to go on errands for her, and to read to her daily—novels on week-days, sermons on Sunday; and always the same old novels, and the same old sermons, of the date of her ladyship's youth, over, and over, and over again.

“I had a great deal of leisure time, for Lady Harriet slept a great deal in the afternoons, and got up late in the day, spending some hours at her toilet, under the hands of her two maids, who regularly rouged and enamelled her face, and dyed her grey hair, and frizzled it into curls, and dressed her slowly and carefully in the style of the early part of the century. My duty was to read to Lady Harriet in bed, before she got up, and also before she went to sleep, and I had her letters to write, as I have said. My post was not an arduous one, as far as work went. But my temper is none of the best, and I hate to be blamed unjustly, and have nothing of the flatterer in my nature, so my life with Lady Harriet Ogle was bitter to me. She did not ill-treat me, but she worried and provoked me. I was always glad to escape from her when I could.

“Rathglas Priory would have been insupportably dull to a young woman like me, but that I had opportunities for gratifying two tastes which I had in those days—for novel-reading, and for rambling among the mountains. Rathermines village lies in the midst of very wild, beautiful scenery, and I, who had always been a good walker, was able to come and go as I pleased, and to visit the nearest glens and crags with no companion but some barefooted peasant-child. As for novels, they had been forbidden fruit to me as a growing girl. My parents were serious, and did not approve of novels; but I liked them, and finding, that besides the shelf of dingy old romances which I had to read aloud to Lady

Harriet till I almost knew them by heart, there were plenty of newer books, bought by Sir Philip, in the library, I devoured them, and seldom walked without a volume in my hand; and I dreamed of all the romantic incidents and surprising adventures that I had heard of, and longed for them to come true. I wished, also, for a friend to whom I could talk of the castles in the air that I built so constantly.

"The friend came. She was of much higher degree than mine. Her name was Aurelia Darcy. She was the niece of Lady Harriet; her mother, Lady Maud Darcy, having been the youngest daughter of the old Earl of Warrenton. Miss Darcy was still in half-mourning. Lady Maud had died not very long before. Mr. Darcy, on whose side the money was, as the aristocratic descent was on his wife's side, had lately purchased an estate called Beechborough Hall, near Blanchminster, in the county of Warwick. I believe that the new-comers were coldly looked upon by their neighbours at that time, and were rather dull in consequence. But at any rate, Miss Darcy was glad to accept her aunt's invitation to spend the summer with her in Ireland. She came. She was very beautiful and very clever, and she was kind to me at first, and I loved her dearly. I never loved anybody, out of my own family, so well. I have never been quite able to break myself of the old feeling; I love her a little, even now, while I write, small cause as I have had to entertain affection or esteem for her.

"We two became fast friends. We were the only young people in the house, and there were very few visitors at Rathglas, except once or twice a year, when the grandees paid a formal call. Aurelia was younger than me. She was not yet eighteen, but she had great latent force of character, and an iron will. I have a strong will too, and I was five years older than she was, and knew more of the

world in my narrow line. I humoured Lady Harriet; but had Miss Darcy given herself any airs of superiority in our early intercourse, we should never have been friends. But she did nothing of the sort. She was quite cordial, pleasant, and frank—yes, she was frank then—and treated me as an equal.

“ Aurelia Darcy, at that time, shared my taste for novel-reading, for romantic day-dreams and high-flown sentiment, and we talked a great deal of nonsense during our rambles about the country. We wandered over the wild Ulster highlands pretty much as we pleased, sometimes on foot, sometimes on shaggy ponies, or jolting for leagues in the low-backed cars that the farmers use. There were carriages at the Priory, of course, but they were never brought out except on the rare occasions when Lady Harriet paid a round of ceremonious visits, or drove in state to Ogletown, so we were thrown on the resources of the country for the means of exploring the glens of Slievedonard and the Mourne Mountains.

“ Aurelia enjoyed this rough liberty excessively. She said that life at Rathglas was like a perpetual picnic, and she relished the hardships inseparable from our constant scrambling among the hills, the fatigue, the rugged paths, the mists and driving showers, the losing ourselves among the moors and bogs, and many other things which must have been novelties to one so delicately nurtured. I had had a plainer bringing up, and was hardy. But Aurelia, who had been a fine lady always, surrounded by luxuries from childhood, really seemed to glory in her indifference to privations and bad weather, and it was always she who proposed the longest and most difficult excursions. She was very well supplied with money, and was liberal and gracious—just the sort of person whom the Irish peasantry would idolise. She was, indeed, very popular among the cotter

tenantry of the Ogle estate, and the poor ill-fed mountaineers would leave their wretched farms, and walk miles among the precipices and morasses to guide the beautiful English lady to some waterfall or lough that she was desirous to sketch.

"Aurelia sketched very well, with a bold free hand, and much delicacy of touch. She had had excellent masters on the Continent, and had brought back with her a quantity of drawings of Alpine and Italian scenery, her own work; and now she was as active in depicting the savage cliffs and woody ravines of Ulster, and seldom stirred without her sketch-book and crayons. Lady Harriet made no objection to the vagrant existence which her niece chose to lead, usually leaving the house before the hour of lunch, and never returning till the late dinner-time, sometimes not before dark; for the district was a primitive one; we were known to all the people as inmates of Rathglas, and as such were sure of attention and respect; and besides, any lady would have been secure from molestation among those poor frieze-clad highlanders, who had none of the vices of townsfolk. However, Lady Harriet made one stipulation, which was, that a certain hanger-on of the establishment, a middle-aged man named Finucane, should accompany us as guide and body-guard. This man's presence annoyed Aurelia, who preferred absolute independence, and she hit upon a plan of giving money to Finucane, and leaving him at some shebeen that we should be pretty sure to pass on our homeward road. The poor fellow, like most Irishmen, could not resist the temptation of whisky and society, and he readily fell in with the young lady's whim, and let us proceed alone, without mentioning this breach of orders to any member of the household at home.

"The idea of getting rid of this man was not Aurelia's. She was unused to deception then, at least I think so,

though she had powers of self-control and concealment such as few women possess, and of which she was not as yet fully aware. The suggestion with respect to Finucane was mine. Perhaps, had not this first step from the right road been taken——But I did not take up my pen to moralise. I deal with facts.

“ One day, in a singularly wild and secluded glen, six miles from Rathermine, we came suddenly upon an artist, a young man, sitting on a boulder of rock, before his easel, sketching the very crag of which Aurelia in a previous day had drawn a rough outline, which she was anxious to finish with the usual accessories of light and shade, the ferns, the arbutus-wood growing like feathers in the clefts, the bare scathed peak of many-coloured rock. Strangers were so scarce in that district, that we were amazed, and stopped short as we turned an angle of the blue cliff, and saw the painter busy with his work. He was a young man, handsome, and with a look of refinement, of over-refinement, perhaps, about his clear-cut delicate features. He was just the sort of man out of whom novel-reading young ladies would fashion a hero to their own minds, tall, slightly-made, and with a graceful head like that of a stag, a pale complexion, and raven-black hair. He wore a tight suit of black velvet, braided in artist style, and a small knapsack lay on the heather at his feet.

“ How our acquaintance with this gentleman began, I cannot, with every wish to tell the truth, intelligibly describe. I remember that on that occasion, looking up from his sketch, and seeing two ladies close to him, he lifted his hat, and bowed to us with a sort of instinctive politeness ; and that seeing that we hesitated what to do, he coloured slightly, and said something about his fear that he was an intruder, and his willingness to atone for his trespass by quitting the glen, if his presence was unwelcome. No

doubt, he took Aurelia, to whom he seemed naturally to address himself, for the daughter of the great landowner, whoever he might be, to whom the estate belonged. It was indeed the only reasonable way of accounting for a lady's appearance among those wilds.

"Very few words were spoken on either side, no more, certainly, than politeness demanded, and we left the place, going further up the glen; but all that day Aurelia was unusually thoughtful, and when she spoke, some allusion to our rencontre of the morning was sure to escape her. She said not a word to Lady Harriet of our meeting with the stranger; nor did I. We met the artist again, and again, and again, perhaps by accident, perhaps not wholly so; and each time a bow, and some few shy words of greeting or of comment on the weather or the scenery, passed on both sides. Then the shyness and restraint wore off; and on the occasion of our fourth meeting, in a little cottage near the crest of a pass, where we, and he, too, were storm-bound among the mountains for hours, we talked together almost as if we had been old friends, while we compared the contents of Aurelia's sketch-book with those of the artist's portfolio. Then, too, he learned our names, and we his. His name was Edward Winslow.

"His name was Edward Winslow. He was twenty-one years of age, an artist by profession, and an orphan. He was from my native county, Lancashire, and a Roman Catholic, as many Lancashire men are. I believe he was of humble parentage, but he avoided that topic. I have heard him mention he had no near relations, and that he had lately succeeded to some small inheritance. His means, whatever they were, were very inconsiderable, and he had his bread to win by work, like myself. He had received a good education, and his talents were undoubtedly of a high order; but his performances as an artist, though they showed

extraordinary promise, were crude, and marred by faults that only instruction and study of the best models and masters could correct. He knew this, and he longed to go to Rome, and spend years in cultivating art at the fountain-head of art, then to come back to England, and win fame by grand and sustained efforts, when his powers should be matured and disciplined. He had plenty of ambition; and when he got over his first shyness, for he *was* shy, though what would have been awkwardness in others was in him merely wild and graceful, he was strangely eloquent in expressing himself on that subject. Aurelia sympathised with his ambition.

“She did more than sympathise with his ambition; she fell in love with him, and he with her, and I have no doubt that both were sincere. I have never seen Shakespeare’s plays acted; indeed, I never was in a theatre in my life but once, in Dublin. But I have read *Romeo and Juliet*. The quick, sudden way in which that young pair fell in love with one another—at first sight, as both of them owned separately to me, their go-between and confidante—reminded me of *Romeo and Juliet*. I could understand the truth of the play by the drama of real flesh-and-blood life that I had seen. They loved each other, and before long they had plighted their faith, and began to talk of marriage.

“I well remember the day when Aurelia Darcy came to me, transfigured, as it were, by emotion, with a faint glow of crimson in her face, so marble-like and calm generally, with a smile that lit up her beauty like sunshine, glowing with happiness, to tell me that Winslow had knelt to her, and that she had promised to be his. She talked long and earnestly, in a half-timid, half-confident way, and repeated much that he had said to her. I dare say his projects were sad stuff, but she looked at them through a rose-coloured light of hope and love, and I, for my part, half believed

them. He and she were to live in Italy for years, loving and beloved, happy in each other, and armed in triple steel against the world that would envy their rapture; and he was to paint and study, and grow famous and skilful, and they were to come back to England, and he was to win renown and honour, and rank and wealth, to lay at Aurelia's feet. Mr. Darcy would forgive them, then, for I forgot to say that it was taken for granted that the match could not take place with the consent of the bride's surviving parent.

"I do not think Winslow was a fortune-hunter; I never did think so. He was too careless about money, too flighty (for in his talk he was very flighty at times, and I have seen Aurelia look at him, perplexed and alarmed, at some rhapsodies of his), and too unpractical. Besides, Miss Darcy was not then the great heiress; her brother was still alive. I do not believe Winslow had any idea of pecuniary benefit from the marriage. He was so proud in his queer morbid way, and had such a horror of mean and mercenary conduct, that I doubt if he would have accepted a maintenance from Mr. Darcy. But Aurelia's high social standing, so much above his own, dazzled him; that I believe, though I doubt if he knew it. He thought her perfection. She was indeed fit to turn the head of a more experienced man than he. But no serious harm would have occurred, but for me."

CHAPTER XXII.

NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

"My duty, as the world would have laid it down, was clear—I ought not to have left Lady Harriet for one moment in ignorance of the engagement which her niece

had formed with a stranger, who had neither birth nor fortune to entitle him to such an alliance. I had acted very wrongly, considering that I was older than Aurelia, and that I was her aunt's salaried companion, in permitting the acquaintance with Edward Winslow to be formed. But when once Aurelia had spoken to me of a declaration of love on the young man's part, of vows exchanged, and a projected marriage, I ought to have hurried to Lady Harriet, and to have told her all. I did nothing of the sort. I was perfectly well aware that my own dismissal was certain, whenever, or however, the story of Winslow's meetings with Miss Darcy should reach my employer's ears. But this was the least of my reasons for secrecy. I really enjoyed the intrigue for its own sake. It was a novel put in action. I had before my eyes a persecuted heroine, a lover, a confidante, cruel relations, all the mechanism of a romance. My own part was a secondary one, but I did not dislike it. I had been a little piqued at first that Winslow should have passed me over so utterly for Aurelia's sake. He was nearer my own rank; his fortunes and mine were equally precarious, and I was silly enough to feel mortified that he should only have seen in me the good-natured convenient associate of the woman he worshipped. But the wound to my vanity was but skin-deep. The young artist was not a man that I could ever have cared for, fascinating as he was. A plainer, bolder man, with a shrewd head and a stout heart, would have seemed to me worth fifty of such sensitive creatures as Edward Winslow.

"Besides my relish for the intrigue, I had other motives. I will state them without reserve. I wished to establish a link between myself and the rich family to which Miss Darcy belonged. Such a link, I mean, as should give me a claim on their good offices, either in gratitude of my services or in fear of my tongue; and this was too fair a chance

to be thrown away. In a short time, in a few weeks, perhaps, Aurelia would leave Ireland, and her friendship for me would wither. Such, I was sure, would be the case if Miss Darcy left Rathglas as she came to it, fancy free. On the other hand, if clandestinely betrothed, or, better still, secretly married, she was bound to me for life. I meant her no harm. I did not wish to harm her, even when I urged on the stolen match by every means in my power. I had a wish to take the petty vengeance on Lady Harriet Ogle of announcing her niece's marriage with a penniless artist, but not immediately, perhaps never; for though I had no little dislike to my employer, my wish to serve my own family was the true mainspring of my conduct.

"I am sure that Winslow honestly intended to maintain his wife by his own unaided exertions, without asking her father for a sixpence; I am equally sure that he would have failed. I thought so then. But I also thought that Mr. Darcy, when he got over his first anger, would make the best of a bad business, and allow the young couple as many hundreds a year as would keep their heads above water. I believe Aurelia had very vague ideas on the subject. Love in a cottage sounds delightfully in the ears of most young girls, and she had never known the want of money, and could not realise, as I could, the hollowness of her lover's projects. Not but that, under favourable circumstances, Winslow might have become an eminent painter. Aurelia, with all her cleverness, believed implicitly, not only in his genius, which he had in plenty, but in the certainty of his success. 'He will be great and famous,' she used to say to me, as if arguing against the whispers of her own prudence; 'he will make himself a name in the world. A painter—and why not! What do I care about his pedigree! It is as good as that of the Hanks family, at any rate. Don't you know, Lydia, that my grandpapa worked at the loom

himself, a factory hand ! All our pretensions to be aristocrats come from the Darcy side; and what do I care for the Darcys, not one of whom, except Lady Harriet, ever acknowledged my existence at all !'

"The fact was, that Aurelia was just then soured against her noble kindred, against the county people of Warwickshire, and the whole system of social exclusiveness. Abroad, she had been always in high society, had known princesses and dukes by the score, and great folks from England too; but on settling at Beechborough she had been very much annoyed at the stiffness and haughtiness of the provincial grandees. This helped Winslow in his suit. She used to declare that he was a finer gentleman by nature and instinct than all the dandies she had known, and that he would have done credit to any rank. Perhaps he would. But I do not think Aurelia cared for him so very much as she fancied she did. She was young and imaginative, and ready to make an Apollo of the first good-looking adventurer who crossed her path, and all the more if his wild, eloquent talk pleased her fancy, and if she could prove her independence of the world's opinions by marrying him.

"I carried letters, I arranged interviews, I gave every aid in my power, and I had the thanks of both, and the malicious pleasure of hoodwinking Lady Harriet, while her niece should be married from under the shelter of her roof, for my reward. It was by my agency that a clergyman was found to perform the ceremony. Aurelia was a Protestant, and her marriage to Edward Winslow by a Roman Catholic ecclesiastic would have been illegal. Although the vicar of Rathermines was on bad terms with Lady Harriet, we dared not apply to him, as he was certain to divulge the whole affair to Aurelia's aunt and father. She was a minor, too, and required consent. However, I had heard of a method in which difficulties of this kind were sometimes

arranged in Ireland. If Aurelia were to be received into the pale of the Church of Rome, her wedding with a Romanist would be legal; and why should she not, in form at least, become a member of that church? I proposed this plan, an audacious one, I own, and a sinful one, for it implied tampering with the most sacred names and mysteries to gain a worldly end; but I was bent upon bringing the affair to a triumphant finish; and I talked Aurelia out of her scruples, which were faint and few.

“What we agreed upon seems shocking now, as I lie here, ill and sad; but we were all of us young and head-strong, and we had not learned to think as seriously of solemn things as we ought. Winslow, though a Catholic, had never been disturbed by Aurelia's Protestantism; and he seemed to consider the stratagem as a venial one; while Miss Darcy chose to see the matter with my eyes, as a mere matter of form, not binding on the conscience. But here delay arose—the parish priest, to my dismay, flatly refused to marry the niece of Lady Harriet Ogle to an unknown suitor, and without the consent of her natural protectors. His motive was not an exalted one; it was fear. Father Dwyer was a timid, elderly man, that dreaded a disturbance; and the wrath of the great landowner seemed awful to him. But if he was timid, he was weak, and not proof against my importunity and Aurelia's bribes. He was in debt, for his influence over his flock was small, and his dues were always in arrears; besides, I argued and pleaded, appealing to his conscience, and threatening to carry the case to his bishop, if he, a servant of the church, refused admission to its fold to one who craved it. He yielded; but only on these terms. Neither for money nor for fine speeches would he personally perform the ceremony; but what he would not do he would permit another to do, lending his chapel, under cover of night, for the marriage.

Also, he would undertake to find a priest in orders who was a stranger to the place, and who would baptise and marry Aurelia Darcy, on condition that the mockery of a ritual (for it was no better) should take place in the dark, and that both parties should solemnly swear not to attempt to look upon the face of the officiating clergyman. The object of this was to prevent the possibility of identifying the priest in a court of justice, for he, as well as Winslow and the witnesses, would be liable to punishment, should a prosecution be instituted. I was assured that the same precautions had been observed on previous occasions, but that the marriage would be valid notwithstanding.

"The name of the parish priest is Father John Dwyer. He is still alive, but his memory is impaired by a paralytic attack. He did not enter the names of the persons married, as he was bound to do, in the books of the chapel, but made a separate and secret entry on a loose leaf, which he afterwards gave up to Aurelia, who destroyed it in my presence. The person whom he induced to perform the ceremony was in full orders, and his name was the Rev. Mark Hagan. He was not of good repute, and came from Munster, and was about to emigrate to America. He had been suspended by his bishop for some irregularity of conduct, but the suspension had been removed, and he was qualified to perform the duties of his office. These particulars I derived from Father Dwyer, who communicated them reluctantly. He was quite sure of the facts he spoke to. I never saw Mr. Hagan's face at all; I believe he turned it away as much as possible during the ceremony; but I kept my word, and did not look at him. Besides, it was so dark that we all looked like dusky shadows moving through the gloom.

"The wretched, ghastly mockery of sacred rites was carried out, in Rathermines Chapel, at nine o'clock on the 14th of August. The necessary words were gabbled rather

than spoken by the unscrupulous priest; and Aurelia's reception into the church to which Winslow belonged, and her marriage to him, were hurried and huddled through with irreverent haste. Her hand did not tremble, though, and her sweet voice was firm, when it was her turn to speak. The witnesses were James Burke, the sacristan, who acts as sexton also, and Bridget Molloy the priest's servant. When I say the priest, I mean Father Dwyer; I do not mean Mr. Hagan. I never saw him at all, except as a great black shadow with outstretched arms and a white cope, or alb—I do not know which they call it—glimmering pale through the darkness. I have been told since, by Father Dwyer, that Mr. Hagan went to America. He seemed very much afraid, Mr. Hagan did, of being indicted and punished for his share in that night's work. He received ten pounds for his services; and that is all I know about him. James Burke, who is lame, and has been sacristan thirty years, and Bridget Molloy, were living and in their situations when I left Ireland. Bridget Molloy is an ignorant woman, who speaks but little English; she cannot read or write; she made her mark, a cross, on the entry in the parish books; but the certificate—yes, that Mr. Hagan wrote.

“Winslow was much excited. He ought to have known the details of the ceremony according to Catholic custom; but he depended on me for everything. He was dreadfully agitated; I did not then guess why. He left everything to me and to the priest; and the responses were dictated to him, and he seemed to have no sort of forethought or knowledge. I had a poor opinion of him personally, though I admit he was fascinating and talented. But I never saw him to such little advantage as in the chapel; he seemed quite helpless; while Aurelia was grand, as she always is, and played her part in the wicked play nobly. When we left the chapel, and went homewards across the dark fields,

I recollect that Edward walked beside Aurelia, with her hand in his, and his arm round her, and whispered pretty lovers' nonsense, and she answered him in tones as sweet and low as the coo of a dove. That was the last of their love-making; they never walked so again.

"Winslow left us at the stone stile in the eleven-acre meadow, at the edge of the Home Farm. It was not safe for him to approach nearer to the mansion in our company, for the second hay-crop was being got in, and some of the men and maids from Rathglas were still romping and chatting among the half-dried swaths of grass. He bent over Aurelia, and kissed her, and she kissed him; then with a low murmur of words, he tore himself away. Before we got across the great meadow, I, who was behind Aurelia, heard some one breathing hard and running: and I turned and found myself face to face with a boy, the priest's acolyte, who carried the censers, lighted the candles, and so forth. The boy's name was Michael—that was his christian name; I do not know his surname. He was nephew to James Burke: he had been present during the marriage, but had not signed the register.

" 'Please, my lady, the certificate. His reverence sent me,' panted out the boy. The devil entered into me, I believe, for instead of telling Aurelia what had occurred, and giving her the proof of her marriage, I thrust it into my own pocket, and gave the boy some small silver, with which he departed well pleased. I had no definite plan with regard to the disposal of this important paper, but I meant to keep it till I saw how matters should turn out. Aurelia suspected nothing. If she had ever heard of such a thing as a certificate, it is probable that this irregular wedding had caused her to forget it; and we were both of us obliged to call our wits to our aid, shortly, to soothe Lady Harriet, who had been remarkably wakeful on that

evening, and who was in a towering passion at the late hours we kept. I forget what our excuse was, but I know it was Aurelia's tact, not mine, that caused it to be accepted.

"Edward Winslow had gone up to a picturesque place in the mountains called Glen Brazil, the prettiest nook in all Tyrone, to prepare a cottage which he had hired for the reception of his well-born wife. This cottage was a charming little abode, built originally by Lord Kilgavock, and which had been inhabited for years by two old maiden sisters, the last of whom was lately dead. Here the young people proposed to dwell for a while, until the winter should come, and they should start for Rome, the future scene of Winslow's studies.

"Aurelia left Rathglas in a hired car, driven by a man named Scanlan, a servant of Mr. Connell, landlord of the Ogle Arms, three miles from Rathermine. I mention this man's name that he may be interrogated if necessary. She was in high spirits. She took very little luggage with her, and no attendant—indeed, she had parted with her French maid before leaving England, and had engaged no other. She meant to send for her trunks on the following day. She had a letter, ready written, addressed to her aunt, which she meant to post at the village of Brazil Dhuv, where Winslow was to meet her at the little inn. This letter announced her marriage. She had no fears on the subject, now that the thing was done, and could not be prevented. I believe that she felt sure of her father's ultimate forgiveness, and of his allowing her as much as would maintain the young couple. She knew, too, that she had money settled on herself, and had few apprehensions for the future. Winslow, on the contrary, had exaggerated ideas of the vengeance and ill will he should incur by clandestinely carrying off the daughter of a powerful family. He was

not a coward; but he was nervous, and had an absurd idea of the influence and malevolence of those whom he was about to offend.

"Aurelia left me, and went on her way full of hope. She loved Edward, and she believed she loved him better than she did. Before she went, we settled between us what should be done. If Lady Harriet, in anger or suspicion, dismissed me, I was to be welcome under Aurelia's roof, and she promised that I should share their fortunes in good and evil, and spoke so kindly that my heart smote me about the certificate. But I kissed her, and she went. When Aurelia reached the village of Brazil Dhuv, which was not on the Ogle estate, she found a crowd gathered about the inn door. From within came smothered sounds of struggling, outcries, shrieks and howls of pain and fury.

" 'Don't be feared, ma'am. 'Tis only a poor creature that's gone mad. A sort of half-sir—a painter, they tell me, and he's hard to hold,' said the barefooted ostler, as he helped Miss Darcy to alight. Urged by a sudden terror, she hastened into the common room of the inn, and there beheld—Edward Winslow!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NARRATIVE CONCLUDED.

"SHE saw him, Edward Winslow, her lover, husband—the man for whom she had given up the pride and prejudices of her station, the bridegroom to whose arms she had fled, and with whom her future life was to be passed. But in what plight? In the centre of a knot of men, who sought in vain to calm or restrain him, struggling, raving, grovelling on the earth, writhing like a crushed worm, with

foam and blood on his lips, his features hideously distorted, his eyes glaring vacantly. It was horrible, horrible ! If such was the impression made upon myself, who only speak from hearsay, and who derive my knowledge of the facts from Aurelia's recital, what must have been the effect of such a sight on Miss Darcy. But she bore it bravely. She did not scream or faint ; she only stopped on the threshold, silent and dismayed. There she stood, gazing fearfully on that figure, that Thing in Winslow's shape, that strove and tore against the merciful hands that held it from dashing itself against the walls. She often congratulated herself afterwards on her presence of mind. I, too, praised her wonderful self-control ; but I, though I am no sentimentalist—now, at least—could not have equalled it. It must have been so natural for a woman, seeing the man she loved in such a state, no matter why, to rush forward, and lay the poor agonised head on her bosom, and own him before the whole world as hers, in a generous outbreak of pity and fondness, that I cannot understand Aurelia's conduct, except by supposing that she loved herself so well, that to sacrifice any human being was easier to her than to compromise her own happiness.

“The landlord, seeing a stranger, evidently a lady by her dress and look, came up to beg her not to be alarmed. ‘’Tis a poor crazed gentleman, Miss—an Englishman. He's only in a fit, maybe ; but 'tis an ugly sight for a lady ; so, if your ladyship would step up-stairs, the——’

“‘It's just epilepsy,’ said an old man in rusty black, the schoolmaster, probably, of the village.

“‘It's madness, acushla !’ growled another man, showing his own fingers, lacerated and bleeding. ‘Look at my hands ; bad cess to him ! that's what I got, houlding him. He's mad, or my name's not Sullivan.’

“Mad ! that dreadful word found an echo in Aurelia's

heart. All her old doubts and surmises regarding her lover—doubts and surmises that she had kept from me even—came crowding on her memory at once, and brought conviction along with them. Yes, Winslow *must* be insane! A diseased brain alone could fully account for his odd behaviour at times—his fits of morbid melancholy, succeeded by extravagantly high spirits—his singular incoherent bursts of mystic oratory. Mad! And she was his wife, the wife of that—that madman, that creature grovelling on the floor! For his sake, she had given up the world.

“ ‘Poor gentleman, sorrow one of us knows him, not even the name of him. He tuk the Folly up glen from my lord’s agent in Ogletown, and it’s like the agent can tell who he is. He spoke of his wife comin’ here to meet him. Does your ladyship know him at all, at all?’ said the good-natured landlady, courtesying to Aurelia. Several persons looked towards Miss Darcy, for so I call her still. Aurelia took one long look at the poor wretch before her, crying aloud, and battling with those who grasped him; and she told me that his aspect reminded her more of what she had always fancied must have been that of the Possessed—the demoniacs mentioned in Scripture—than anything she had ever seen. She turned shuddering away. In those few moments, love had died out in her breast, and only horror, and a keen desire to escape the consequences of what she now regarded as adventurous folly, succeeded to the dead love. It was a critical moment; many eyes were upon her. She made her election; it was the turning-point of her life; but in spite of her courage, even she was agitated as she replied: ‘No, I never saw the—never saw him before. Has he no——’

“ She meant to have said, had he no friends to care for him; but shame rose in her, in spite of herself, and cut the

sentence short. And then a new incident occurred. Aurelia has a very remarkable voice, which few who have heard it forget. It is more musical than other voices—not loud, but so very distinct, and with a sort of silvery sweetness in it that I never heard in others. Winslow had loved, dearly loved to listen to her as she sung him some plaintive old ballad, now and then, in our mountain excursions; and here her voice fell on his rage and frenzy like oil on a stormy sea. He looked round, saw her, and tried to spring towards her, stretching out his arms, and loudly exclaiming: ‘Aurelia, Aurelia, my beautiful, my dearest, my queen—save me! They are upon me—to drag me down, down to the pit where the snakes are twining and hissing, where they——O Aurelia, help me—help——’

“And he foamed and gnashed his teeth, and could not speak.

“‘Oh, I cannot bear this: let me go away; indeed, I cannot bear this,’ cried Aurelia, hurrying away, horror-struck, pursued by the inarticulate howls and cries of the sufferer. She hastened to the car. The driver was undoing the rough rope harness of the horse; she hastily bade him desist; she must go back at once. The man hesitated. The horse was weary, he said; and he had understood that her ladyship would not require him to return to Rathermine that evening, for it was getting late. The shadows of evening were closing in, and the sun was below the mountain-peaks. Aurelia persisted; she reiterated her orders. Scanlan sulkily obeyed. The landlady came out, expressing her regret that the visitors should have had so sad a welcome to Glen Brazil.

“‘Drive steady, Mike,’ she said to Scanlan, who was known to her, though Aurelia was not. ‘The young lady—bless her handsome face—has been scared by seein’ the poor cratur in-doors, and no wonder. Don’t cry, Miss’—for

there were tears, for once, in Aurelia's eyes—'you're quite safe now. Sure ye'll never see him again, alanna!'

"But before Aurelia went, she rallied her powers of intellect, and told Mrs. Morrison, the landlady, that she sincerely pitied the poor gentleman who was so ill; that she hoped they would be kind to him, and treat him well; and that, as she knew Lord Kilgavock's agent, and should be in Ogletown on the day following, she would make inquiry respecting the unfortunate stranger, and would take steps which would ensure his being duly cared for, and towards communicating his melancholy condition to such relatives of his as might be discovered. In the mean time, she entreated that he might have gentle usage, and on no account be permitted to leave the inn, lest he should injure himself in some paroxysm of his disorder. She enforced these injunctions by a gift of three sovereigns, again assured the people that she would lose no time in informing Mr. Gooch, Lord Kilgavock's agent, of the misfortune that had befallen his tenant; and when the car drove off, she left behind her the reputation of being the most charitable, angelic, soft-hearted, and beautiful lady that had ever graced the village with her presence. A cheer and a shower of blessings followed her as Scanlan whipped the jaded horse into a trot, and the car rattled down the ill-kept road. Aurelia told me that she kept up her courage for about five minutes more, and then bent forward and wept, but kept down her sobs by stern self-control, lest Scanlan should suspect anything. I can believe this, though I never saw a tear in Aurelia's eyes. It was very late when she got back. Lady Harriet was alarmed; the men-servants had been sent to scour the village of Rathermines and glean tidings of Miss Darcy; Finucane had been questioned, and so had I. I had stoutly protested my ignorance of my friend's proceedings, and had been soundly rated for my pains. Lady

Harriet was very hard with me that evening, and said cutting, spiteful things in her anger. I could scarcely help retorting, but I bit my lips, and refrained.

“Then Aurelia came in. Her eyes, I thought, showed traces of weeping; but she was very much excited, and in an apparently joyous mood. I was excessively surprised at seeing her; but she hardly looked at me, but addressed herself to Lady Harriet, who had drawn herself up in the stiff, stately, frigid way she sometimes assumed, and coldly asked an explanation of her niece's reason for staying out till near eleven at night and alone. Aurelia has a winning way, that few can resist. When she chooses to coax, and to be playful, and to supplicate with eager, pretty ways, that seem more pretty when they belong to such an imperial-looking woman, she is almost sure of success. She succeeded in charming away Lady Harriet's ill-humour. The story she told her ‘dear aunt’ of a trip to Lough-na-Sheah, or the Lake of the Fairies—a trip which she was whimsical enough to make alone, the rather that I, her usual companion, was suffering from a severe toothache—with all the details of a lost horseshoe, a lame horse, a tipsy smith, who had to be wakened from his drunken sleep before the forge could be set to work, and other misadventures, was told so naturally, so amusingly, that the proud old mistress of Rathglas laughed heartily for once; and when the tale was ended, kissed her niece and patted the fair young cheek with her wrinkled hand, in token of forgiveness.

“So well was this story—made up, I believe, on the spur of the moment—kept up, that I myself felt as if I were dreaming. But when I was alone with Aurelia, she drew from her pocket the letter she had penned and carried to Glen Brazil—the letter that was to have told her aunt of her stolen marriage; she thrust this letter into the flame of the candle, and watched it burn till it fell on the marble of the

chimney-piece, a heap of feathery-grey tinder. Then she gave a little sigh, and looked up.

“‘That, at least, will tell no tales,’ she said. ‘How lucky that I did not leave it on my aunt’s table, as I first thought of doing.’

“‘What does all this mean, Aurelia?’ I asked, stupid with surprise.

“She sighed again. But her eyes were quite dry, and her smile as hard and bright as steel when she answered: ‘It means that all that happened in that chapel is to be treated as a dream. The dream is over for ever. Edward and I can never be husband and wife, even in name.’

“And then she told me all. I was greatly shocked, but not very sorry, I am afraid. I was not glad of the terrible calamity that had fallen on poor Edward, but I felt more excitement than compassion, as we often do, when misfortunes come upon our neighbours. My sympathy with Aurelia was genuine for the time. I felt quite angry that she should have been thus deceived, for Winslow’s reticence with respect to his liability to epileptic fits, if he was aware of the taint in his blood, was certainly very blameworthy. But Aurelia was much more angry than I was.

“‘The ungrateful, treacherous wretch!’ she said, bitterly. ‘I gave up all for him, and how he betrayed me! Do not take his part, Lydia, and pretend that you do not believe him to be mad. You did not see him as I saw him, I tell you. Oh, if you had——As if it were not enough to have given up friends, and position, and my station in life, to marry a man without birth or property! I have sacrificed myself for a girlish fancy; but my folly is over now.’

“I did not venture to remind Aurelia of the fine sentiments she had expressed when she had declared the penniless artist one of nature’s nobility, or to recal to her how she

had ridiculed the idea of the granddaughter of Mr. Hanks standing in terror of a *mésalliance*. I did say that I thought Winslow not exactly mad, though he had perhaps the seeds of insanity in his heated brain ; he might be very much to blame for keeping silence, when prevailing on a girl to marry him, on the subject of the terrible hereditary complaint from which he suffered ; but I also doubted if he knew even that. It might be that this was a first attack ; it might be that he had no knowledge of the existence in his family of that mysterious stigma ; it might be——

“ ‘Yes,’ coolly broke in Aurelia ; ‘but mad or sane, innocent or guilty, I would sooner lie in my grave, with the winding-sheet around me, and the earth piled upon my head, than I would live in wealth and splendour with such a husband at my side. Had you seen him as I——Enough on that subject ! Lydia Crawse, you helped me to marry this man. Help me, now, again. Help me to get rid of the fetters I have forged for my own sorrow. Do this—get me my liberty, and I am bound to you for life.’

“ I did help her. We took counsel together ; and I was astonished to find how powerful was Aurelia’s intellect, which seemed to have grown and strengthened under the agitation of a scene that would have shaken many women’s nerves for months. It was she who suggested nearly every mode of escape from the difficulty into which her rash attachment had conducted her. It was essential to dispose of Winslow, to place him in the keeping of some one whose interest it would be to prevent his re-entering the outer world, and to cut him off, as far as possible, from all communication with his fellow-creatures. And she asked me if I did not know of some doctor in the district who had the repute of being needy and unscrupulous. I replied that, unless report maligned him, Dr. Kelly, who lived in a lonely place, called Nine Stone Bridge, half way between Rather-

mines and Lisnavard, and who was described as clever, but as a tipsy brute, who ill treated his gentle little wife, and who had been indicted as chief of a Ribbon society, was just the sort of man.

"Aurelia at once expressed her intention to commit Winslow to this person's custody, and to make such offers of money as would enlist the doctor on her side, even should the patient apparently recover. We could drive to Ogle-town, professedly, and diverge to Nine Stone Bridge. And when I mentioned the law and the Commissioners of Lunacy, she laughed scornfully, bidding me remember how wild and untaught were the peasantry around us, and how easily a man might be treated illegally, where all regarded the law with dislike and hostility. She was sure that Winslow could be kept securely, in spite of all statutes to the contrary.

"I did not object very strongly to this course, which Aurelia urged with unrelenting eagerness. But I felt as if I were growing afraid of my friend, and as if it would be unsafe to oppose her, while my interest seemed to coincide with hers. But still, as Miss Darcy developed her scheme, I could not keep back the words that fell from my lips half unconsciously: 'Why, that would be a living tomb!'

"Aurelia started as if I had struck her."

"Not the less did she persevere in what I now believe was a most wicked purpose. I did not, then, choose to see matters as they really were. Cruel, I thought Aurelia's plan, cruel and unwomanly, but not a crime. As I write—it comes back to me more clearly—yes, it was a crime, and I a willing accomplice. We went to Nine Stone Bridge in state, for Lady Harriet, hearing that her niece wished to go to Ogletown, the nearest place where there were shops, and having taken her into high favour since the escapade and reconciliation of the evening before, insisted on lending her

the great yellow chariot, with the high-stepping grey horses, and had even some thoughts of accompanying her. This idea, her ladyship fortunately gave up; but I was permitted to go with Miss Darcy, that I might consult a dentist on the score of a 'dreadful toothache.' We drove quietly through Rathermines, and then Aurelia drew the check-string, and bade the coachman take the longer road, as she wished to stop at Dr. Kelly's house at Nine Stone Bridge.

"We found the doctor a man well suited to our purpose—a strongly-made, reckless-looking person, with a face that was bloated and blotched from constant intemperance, unshaven, slovenly, unwashed, but still cunning and resolute. He was killing himself with drink, to 'drown care,' as he said, after losing a good practice in Cork by his own misconduct; and he would have been lodged in jail long since, but that creditors and bailiffs were alike unwilling to offend a desperado whose connexion with the most murderous of the secret societies was more than suspected, and who had been heard to boast that the man who arrested him might as well order his coffin at once. The doctor had a poor young wife whom everybody pitied, and whom he ill treated cruelly,—so rumour went. His house was a lonely one, built of stone, and as stern and dismal as a prison. The windows were barred with iron, and the doors of unusual thickness, and studded with huge square-headed nails. These precautions had been taken by a former proprietor, who was what is called in Ireland 'unpopular;' and who, after all his trouble, was murdered on his road home from market. A better house for the purpose of secreting an illegally-confined lunatic could not easily have been found, and the doctor jumped at the bait which Miss Darcy held out to him. I could not help admiring the tact with which she managed to make this ruffian—an educated ruffian, and therefore worse than others—her instrument and slave. She

flattered his vanity by her apparent frankness and trust in him, an outlawed scamp, at war with respectability. Her beauty and graceful boldness thawed the man's morose reserve surprisingly. Much as he wanted money, I believe the hundred and twenty pounds he was to receive annually for taking care of Winslow was not so much an inducement, as the notion, artfully implied, that he should thereby win a victory over his old enemy, the Law.

"That very afternoon, Dr. Kelly drove in a post-chaise to Glen Brazil, accompanied by a stout-limbed peasant, who would have done anything at the bidding of one who had the Ribbon passwords, and who was as completely devoted to the doctor as if he had been his dog. This man groomed the doctor's horse and cultivated his garden. His name, I think, is Doyle or Moyle. He does not speak English. Dr. Kelly made use of the name of Mr. Gooch, the agent, and took possession of Winslow, whose fury was spent, and who was helpless, and hardly conscious. The people at the inn had no suspicion of any wrong being meant. They were very glad to be relieved of their troublesome charge. Dr. Kelly visited the cottage that poor Edward had hired, and removed the scanty effects that belonged to him, for fear some letters or other papers should provoke inconvenient curiosity. He took Winslow home, and shut him up in a room at the back of the house. That is all I know of his proceedings, except that he gave Aurelia back her letters to Winslow, which she destroyed. She also destroyed the loose leaf containing the registry of her marriage, and which Father Dwyer gave up to her. She obtained this from him by importunity, and perhaps bribery. He promised to keep her secret, and swore on the Four Evangelists to be true to his word. He has been true to his word. So, I believe, has the doctor, who also swore not to reveal anything, even in confession, till Aurelia should give him leave.

"Shortly after this, Aurelia left her aunt's house, and

returned home to her father's in Warwickshire. We parted very good friends. She renewed her promises to help me through life to the utmost of her power. She gave me several trinkets—some of them were of value. I have sold them all, or nearly all, at various times, when my mother—I feel my strength is going—I must hurry now. I stayed behind at Rathglas for two years and a half, enduring much for the sake of those dear to me. My brothers were at school, and my salary assisted in paying for—I cannot dwell on details. I came to England at last—saw Aurelia. She had corresponded with me for a few months, then her letters had ceased. I found her hard, cold, ungrateful. I appealed to her feelings, in vain. I threatened; she yielded, and agreed to help me by getting my brothers, Tom and Willie, pushed on in life. She has deceived me. I do not believe she has even tried to help me. I have had money from her—ninety pounds, in two sums. It seemed to burn my fingers when I handled the notes. The money was not for myself. I hope my brothers will one day—repay—I am so faint now that I cannot go on—But Edward Winslow is alive—or was alive lately. I saw him, in hiding, at a cottage near Crowleigh, the first turnpike on the Blanchminster-road. He had escaped from Dr. Kelly. Dr. Kelly wrote to inform Aurelia, and I saw the letter. Dr. Kelly is since dead; I saw his death in a newspaper; and I wrote to an acquaintance, and heard that he died of delirium tremens. I suppose he could not watch so well over—Winslow it was who fired the pistol at Aurelia—she saw his face. She told me—They say he he is drowned; I do not believe it. I think he is either living, and if so, Aurelia is—in danger—jealous and vindictive—good cause to hate—or he was made away with. I know Aurelia tampered with some men of evil character—Brown, Nicholas Brown, is the name, I know, son of the woman who keeps the toll-bar on the—Murdered—I

fear she meant him to be murdered. She said it was not so. False—false! When she is married to Lord Lynn—I hope my family—claim on her fears—her reputation is—Oh, preserve this—it is all I have to leave—dear ones—This is death, this——”

And here the pen had dropped away from the relaxing fingers, and a long, irregular line of ink ran across the page, terribly significant. The hand that wrote was stiff and cold, but the writing was still fresh and glistening.

The surgeon deliberately rose from the perusal of this narrative, folded the papers, and carefully placed them in his pocket. Then he paced the room several times in deep thought, “walking quarter-deck,” as he called it, and the red flush of shame, for he was an honest man, rose to his brow.

Suddenly he started. “Fool that I am!” he exclaimed. “This, this—I cannot trust myself to speak of her—is to be married this morning, she who has another husband alive; for as for murder, that’s absurd. I’ll gallop over with this precious document to Hollingsley. Lord Lynn shall know what his precious bride elect—the heroine of this rascally tale—really is——But stop! the certificate that poor misled wench spoke of—I ought to have that to show.”

And Mr. Killick hurried up-stairs, pulling out his watch as he went.

“I may catch him, yet, if I ride fast. I could get to Holton Church in time to stop the marriage, of course; but then there would be a scandal and a row. We must avoid that. Poor Anne, how sorry she will be!” And the surgeon hesitated, but only for a moment.

“It is my duty,” he said, and pressed on—on into the room of death. No one had entered it since he left it. He took up Miss Crawse’s keys that lay on the dressing-table, and unlocked first one of her little trunks, then the other;

then he opened her quaint, old-fashioned desk, and tossing over the letters it contained, drew out a folded paper. As he unfolded it, his fingers trembled; he knew at a glance that this was what he sought. But he could not help wincing as he looked up, involuntarily, at the figure on the bed, so awfully still beneath the sheet that covered the face from mortal ken. "It seems as if I were robbing her, poor lass," he groaned out; "but it's my duty. If I don't do it, I am a rogue, for whom keel-hauling would be too good."

And in ten minutes more he was riding towards Hollingsley Court at as rapid a pace as he had ever ridden, even to attend a dying patient, where death or life might hang on half an hour's delay. He feared to be too late after all.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WEDDING-DAY.

THE day was cold, but it was fine, with a pale-blue frosty sky and a cheerful winter sun; grateful to the birds that sung in the leafless woods, as if they thought St. Valentine and pairing-time nearer than the almanac allowed. The guests who came trooping towards Beechborough agreed that Miss Darcy was fortunate in weather, as in other matters. There was quite a strong muster of the invited ones, and the yellow and pink drawing-rooms overflowed with company. There were some personages present in honour of this occasion whom the Hall had never before been honoured by receiving. The Earl of Warrenton, for instance—very short, fat, and red-faced, extremely awkward and abrupt of speech and gesture, and by no means realising

the beau-idéal of an earl, had come to the wedding of his sister's child; so had the Honourable and Rev. Cyril Darcy, who was to perform the ceremony; "assisted," as the newspapers were ready to announce, by Mr. Croft, the rector, whose parishioner Aurelia was. Lord Warrenton was a bachelor, and Mrs. Cyril Darcy was indisposed; but there were two other brothers of poor Lady Maud, a colonel and an under-secretary from some government office, and these had brought their wives with them. This group of Darcys, not one of whom had ever been even commonly civil to intrusive George, until that parvenu's daughter was certain to be a peeress, had condescended to accept intrusive George's invitation, and had been staying for two days past at Beechborough.

None of the bridegroom's near relatives, except the Mainwarings, were present. Admiral Wyvil was sadly busy, and could not just then be released from the bonds of red tape which linked him to Somerset House; and the dowager, with her daughters, the Honourable Misses Wyvil, were still abroad. But two or three persons of rank and fortune, allied to the Wyvils, had driven long distances to be present; and the Mainwarings were there. It was no pleasant task for even gentle Lucy to stand by while the man whom she loved should plight his vows to another in the face of heaven and of men; but Lucy had taken herself sorely to task, and had succeeded in convincing herself that Lord Lynn was nothing to her, except a person in whom she took a cousinly interest, but whom duty and modesty alike forbade her to love. And Mrs. Mainwaring had urged on her husband, and on her daughter, and on herself, the propriety of giving no handle for ill-natured reports on the subject of their daughter's feelings, and had insisted that they owed it to themselves and to society to appear both at church and at breakfast,

and to wish Aurelia joy. So the Mainwarings were there.

So was good Mrs. Croft from the Rectory, with something very like a bird of paradise on her brand-new bonnet from Regent-street; so were the Croft girls, rustling in their new finery of pale-blue and stone-coloured silks, suited to their complexions, and with bonnets, and ribbons, and shawls all new, and all alike, as sisters delight to dress. So was not Mr. Croft, who had gone down to the church; but Mrs. Flathers was there, and people of higher consideration than Mrs. Flathers—all the cream of that side of Warwickshire. These buzzed, and smirked, and criticised one another, commenting on the presents given, or to be given, the jewels that Lord Warrenton was reported to have ordered from Hancock or Emmanuel as a gift to the bride, his niece; the wonders of the trousseau; and so forth. Happy were those who had had a peep at the superb show of the long tables, laid out for the wedding breakfast with tasteful magnificence, and glowing with flowers, mingled with gold, silver, and Bohemian crystal, as if December were June. Two of the four fair girls who, as bridesmaids, were regarded as the most important and interesting personages of the day, save only the bride, to whom they were to act as satellites, were in the pink drawing-room, and very charming they looked in their bright gauzy attire, and with their radiant young faces rosy with happiness. The other two were up-stairs; for the bride's toilet, not the least momentous feature of that morning's preparations, was in course of completion. Busy women were going to and fro, as eager and anxious about the trifles that engrossed them, as if Aurelia's whole happiness in life depended on the needle and thread, the paper of pins, the tapes, and narrow sarcenet ribbons for which they came and went; and a subdued, but constant

murmur of voices and shutting of doors up-stairs, buzzed through the house.

The bride was rather late in making her appearance, but that is a matter-of-course circumstance at every wedding, and people only smiled as the clock struck, and the array of carriages churned up the gravel before the Hall; and still the hum, as of a hive of bees, resounded from above; but Miss Darcy did not come. The bridegroom, however, was fair game for such mild wit as circulates on these occasions; and Lord Lynn was severely rallied behind his back for his tardiness in arriving. Old anecdotes were quoted of absent-minded Benedicts who had gone out fishing, or over-slept themselves, or started on a journey, all oblivious of the great event of the day. There was much laughter, if the jokes were poor ones, and all went on pleasantly; and George Darcy's face was the only sad one there, except those of the Mainwaring party, who found it more difficult to be merry off-hand than they had thought would be the case. As for Mr. Darcy, he was going to lose his daughter; it was a real loss to him, and he went about striving to be in hilarious spirits, and drawing down upon himself the compassion of the more sharp-sighted of the guests.

Time crept on. Lord Lynn did not come. People began to fidget, and to compare infallible watches with the French clocks on the chimney-pieces, and to look inquisitively out of such windows as commanded a view of the road through the park.

Mrs. Croft began to think it was very late indeed, and that her liege lord would have rather a dull time of it, kicking his heels in the mouldy little vestry, in company with the clerk and the pew-opener. But then came down the bridesmaids, carrying their little heads proudly, and rustling as they passed through the crowd, under a fire of questions.

"Yes, dear Miss Darcy would be down in a moment. She was dressed at last. She looked lovely—lovely. They had never seen her look so beautiful, or so like a queen before—never."

A few minutes passed, but Lord Lynn did not come. It was after time. The carriages must be driven at a smart pace to accomplish the distance to Holton Church, so as to get the marriage-ceremony over within canonical hours. And after the marriage, there was the breakfast; and there was no slight prospect that the newly-wedded pair might lose the train that was to whirl them from the nearest station southwards on their honeymoon tour's first stage.

"Time and tide wait for no man, and trains are much the same," jocularly observed Sir Joseph, the county member. "In our day, bridegrooms were a little more ardent, eh, Dr. Gillies?"

Dr. Gillies, who was the only doctor there, as he had been the only doctor when the festivities of the Beechborough Ball were so rudely interrupted, rubbed his hands and nodded his bald head in assent. Lord Lynn was certainly very late. The bridesmaids had spoken the truth. Aurelia looked a glorious creature indeed on that festive morning that was to be the prelude to a long and brilliant career of worldly prosperity. Her stately beauty was enhanced and softened by the marvellous robes of virginal white, rich with snowy lace, by the long bridal veil, the shimmering moonlight lustre of the pearls on her fair neck, and the wreath of pure orange-blossoms that set so gracefully on her majestic head and broad leonine brow. Can you fancy a young empress on the morning of her espousals, maidenly, but right royal in her commanding loveliness? If so, Aurelia Darcy realised all that even a poet could dream of, after her haughty fashion. The last touches had

been put to the completion of that wonderful structure, the wedding attire of a fashionable bride, and the untiring fingers of the feminine artists could do no more. Even the experienced housekeeper, who had been tirewoman to a duchess in her young days, and who shared the office of decoratrix with Jennings and the French maid, Mademoiselle Coralie, newly hired to supplement Jennings in her duties, and be hated accordingly by that waiting damsel—even the housekeeper declared that it would be painting the lily to alter so much as a ruffle of lace, or an inch of satin ribbon. So the female Pygmalsions, ready to worship the magnificent statue in whose adornments they felt a proprietary right, retired with lingering glances of admiration, and went to give themselves full credit below stairs for all the beauty at which young and old must marvel when the bride, radiant in youth and splendour, should descend the grand staircase.

Aurelia remained alone. Her chamber opened into the blue room, that favourite apartment from the window of which she had watched Lord Lynn riding by Lucy Mainwaring's side through the Park, on a certain bright September day, at the commencement of this history. The bedroom, Miss Darcy's room, had four doors in all, one of which led to the blue room, one to a dressing-room in which was a marble bath, one to the landing-place at the head of the principal staircase. The fourth door, smaller than the others, and less conspicuous, communicated with a narrow and tortuous passage leading to the back-stairs up which the Beechborough housemaids came and went, like useful brownies, whose good deeds of keeping the house in order were done by stealth. This back-passage had formerly been directly accessible from the outside of a house, where a flight of stone steps led up from the garden to a door, long disused, that opened into

the passage. This door was always understood to be locked, though it is probable that the rusty screws and wormeaten wood made the fastenings of small avail. But there is seldom much fear of burglary in a great country-house, with plenty of men-servants at hand, and the condemned door was not regarded as a weak point by which an enemy might break in. The only other door that opened into the passage, besides that of Aurelia's bed-chamber, belonged to a lumber-room, where old saddles, mildewed holsters, hair-trunks, India screens, cracked china that some former proprietrix had intended, perhaps a century ago, to employ the gipsies to mend, and similar paraphernalia, reposed undisturbed amid dust and cobwebs. The servants were not fond even of peeping into this repository of old-world lumber, some tradition, at fourth hand, of an eighteenth-century coachman who had hanged himself there for love, having reached their ears.

Aurelia was alone. She looked again at her own beautiful image in the pier-glass, and first she smiled, then sighed, and then smiled again, all the pretty dimples about the handsome mouth coming into view again for the last time. There was the calm pride of triumph in her face, as she fronted the glass, and looked at the reflexion of the mystic orange-blossoms and the bridal veil. She felt happy then. A few drops of bitterness might mingle, perhaps, with the cup of joy at her lips, but she was happy—an awful happiness, standing as she stood on the brink of the shadowy Future. It is a hackneyed simile, that of Damocles at the feast, with the sharp sword hanging over his neck by a hair, ready to fall. But an unconscious Damocles, blind and deaf to the threatening danger, hopeful and confident under the very sparkle and flash of the blade—is not that more terrible ! Aurelia Darcy had no fears ; she turned away from the silent flattery of the great pier-glass,

and opening the door that led into the blue room, passed through it. She had locked the door of her bedroom that communicated with the landing-place and chief staircase ; she now locked the outer door of the blue room ; as she did so, a strange repugnance to the act, so trifling in itself, in which she was engaged, came over her ; and her fingers dallied with the key, lingering before they turned it. She was angry with the instinct that rose within her, and her lip curled as she turned the key in the lock. She had cut herself off from her last chance, had flung away the last hope of safety ; but she was blind to that, as to the rest.

She had locked herself in thus, that in the last few moments of her unmarried life, she might burn some letters. Softly she opened a little ebony casket, a pretty toy from Italy, studded with ivory and gold, and from a secret drawer took out three old letters in a man's handwriting. Miss Crawse had related how she had seen Aurelia burn the letters which she had written to Edward Winslow. She was now about to burn his to her, which, by some strange inconsistency of her stubborn heart, she had kept to the last. She took up a match-box, kindled a taper, and prepared to destroy the letters. First she burned one, and then a second, watching the scorched paper, with the loving, passionate words upon it, shrivel and blaze and fall to ashes. How she had kissed those letters once, when the ink was new, and the characters were glorified by fancy as though written in gold, and the contents of every page were worth reading a dozen times over, before they were tenderly consigned to their hiding-place in the most beautiful bosom in the world ! Now, the letters were old rubbish, useless, perhaps dangerous ; let them perish. As she thrust the third letter into the flame, and saw the fire fasten on it, blotting out the words as it burned on, she thought she heard the creaking of a door. She had omitted to secure the back-door of her

bedroom, that which led to the servants' part of the house. But though she listened, there was no rustle of feminine attire, as there would have been had some officious Abigail made her way in, unbidden. Nor was the creaking sound renewed; the only sounds Aurelia heard were the stamping of the horses' feet on the gravel without, where the carriages waited, and a low hum from the company that had overflowed the drawing-rooms, and encroached on the oak-floored entrance-hall.

She burned the last letter. She was ready to go down, and as she gathered up her sweeping skirts with one hand, with the other she let the last fragment of charred paper fall upon the hearth.

"I have finished with the Past!" she said, almost sorrowfully, and as she turned and passed the mirror, she glanced again at her own beauty, imaged in its broad surface. But as she did so, her heart suddenly stopped beating, the blood seemed to freeze in her veins, her features stiffened into a fixed look of mortal fear, of almost more than mortal fear. In the glass she had seen *two* faces. And that other face! better the Gorgon's grisly visage, with snaky locks, and eyes that changed the flesh they gazed on into stone—better Medusa and her direful sisterhood, than that face, young still, but gaunt, haggard, menacing, that met her startled stare of horror as abruptly as if her last words had evoked from the regions beyond the grave the spectre of a dead love and a dead past!

For a moment, a long cruel moment, she stood thus; and then, as the impulse of self-preservation rose up and spurred her to action, she gave a smothered shriek—her voice failed her at her utmost need, and was quite weak and low, as our voices are when we cry aloud in horrible dreams—and she sprang to the door. He, the man whose image she had seen in the glass, was close behind; she knew it, but her

movement had been quick. Ah! lost—lost! The door was locked. Her shaking fingers could not turn the key in time. The pursuer reached her. She felt his breath on her cheek. He tore her grasp away from the door, dragged her back, back to the corner of the hearth where she had lately stood, busy in destroying the letters. Again she tried to scream for help. It was too late. His hand was pressed upon her mouth, the other hand clutched her arm with the gripe of a smith's vice, and in an instant more the fingers of the hand that had been pressed upon her mouth slipped from their hold, and clasped her white neck, not violently, but resistlessly, with the supple strength of a serpent coiling around his prey. Then she knew that she was doomed. But she did not swoon or fall; she stood, with heaving breast and white lips, fronting the danger. And then the man, a wild, travel-stained figure, fixed his eyes, glittering with ominous menace, on those of the bride.

"We are face to face at last!" he said, hoarsely. "Aurelia Darcy and Edward Winslow have met once more. Not as lovers now—not as husband and wife; no, but as judge and criminal. All the wealth in the world cannot avail you now!"

CHAPTER XXV

FROM THE PAST.

AURELIA stood panting for breath, her eyes fascinated, as it were, by the glare of those unnaturally bright eyes so close to hers, as a bird is attracted, in spite of its cries and flutterings, by the deadly gaze of the expectant snake. We do not refuse our pity to the guiltiest wretch in that last terrible hour when the fetters are struck off, and the condemned one is slowly led to the place where gallows and hangman

are waiting to strangle the life out of his miserable body. But Aurelia Darcy was in worse case than even the manslayer whom Society slays from out of the muster-roll of the living. She needed pity more. For her there was not even such hope of a late penitence as may visit the murderer's cell. She could not pray; her whole soul was one great fear; and the fear was of death and pain.

She had been stupified at first, but it was not in her nature to submit to more than a momentary suspension of thought. The dreary blank of mere animal terror vanished, and her intelligence revived, but brought no consolation along with it. The sentenced captive of old times, bowing her neck to the block, as the axe was lifted, had as much hope as she had—more hope, perhaps; for kings sometimes relent. The lion now and then removes his paw from the palpitating victim, and lets it live. Would Edward Winslow let her live? She read no tidings of mercy in his eyes, shining forth so savagely from the deep hollows around them. He was very pale, wasted, worn by sleeplessness and privations, worn still more by care; but his strength was very far from being spent. She had felt how strong he was, when he whirled her back from the door like a feather. Her dainty robe had been torn in the short struggle, and his rude foot was pressed on a long rent fragment of the cobweb-like lace, as it trailed on the carpet. His face was full of expression, hate and a hideous joy predominating. His nerves were evidently strung to the fullest tension. But was he mad? Perhaps, if he were mad, there might be some chance for her—his mood might change. She had heard of such changes as have ere this saved the lives of the sane, sudden ebbs of the violent homicidal passion, when wild mirth or dejection abruptly claim lordship over the disordered brain.

If he were mad, too, she might conquer yet. Her own

strong mind rallied all its force for the emergency; she could soothe him, if he would but listen to her; and even if he would not hear a word, his fury might not hold out before her steady looks, if she betrayed no fear. And if he were not mad, could she not plead for her life, if he would let her speak, ay, plead so that not a man on earth could say her nay, were his wrongs never so hard to endure. Hastily she bethought her of tears, and kneeling, and uplifted hands, and sobs and cries—all the female armoury that has done its work so well for countless ages. If he were not mad, and she escaped the first outburst of his wrath, why, surely, she would live, and not die. Disgrace might come, perhaps *must* come, but life was long, and her intellect had resources unknown even to itself. And even delay was something, for a chance of rescue might——

“Aurelia!” said the cause of all this doubt and dread, and his eyes watched her as a tiger watches the prey for whose life-blood he thirsts—“Aurelia Winslow, I have had this moment before me, sleeping and waking, very long. The nights were weary and dark, but I saw you always, always. And now the moment has come. Ah, do not think to speak, to turn me from my purpose by false words, for I will not hear you. That sweet, treacherous voice, Aurelia Winslow, will never deceive any one again—never, never, never!”

He had seen that she strove to speak, and his bony fingers had tightened their clutch on the rounded white throat, so that to speak was impossible. Aurelia could just breathe, and that was all. To struggle was to hasten the end; therefore she stood, passive, and her cold grey eyes, inscrutable and dauntless, looked upon him steadily. He turned his own restless eyes away, as if uneasy under that calm gaze, and his features worked painfully, while the face of the woman before him was now as rigid and composed as if

it had been of pure marble. But his grasp was strong, and his voice was very distinct, though low, as he went on :

“ I am come from my tomb, where you laid me, a living man, to be hidden away from the world. I have suffered much, Aurelia Winslow. The brute whom you made my jailer first of all, he who bound me, beat me, kept me down by stripes and hunger, told me in one of his drunken fits of boasting to whom I owed it all. It was to Aurelia—to my wife. And when first you flung me into that den of pain—I was not mad!”

He said the last words in a dreary, dejected manner, and not violently ; then he went on : “ Not mad. That came later. Wife, you have wrecked my reason, as you robbed me of my liberty. You are face to face now with a madman of your own creation. It gnawed and gnawed, and the cord snapped at last, eaten through by the long torture. You have yourself to thank—only yourself.”

There was a pause ; and then the maniac, if maniac he were, spoke again : “ I knew this was the day ; I counted the hours as they crawled slowly by, and mocked me as I lay chained. I broke the chains ; I broke from the prison ; all the earth above my head could not keep me down. I shall be more merciful than you were ; you shall not be thrust living into your grave.”

He said nothing more for some moments, and then he forced her to turn towards the glass, and with the hand that had held her arm hitherto, he pointed to the reflexion of the set colourless face, crowned by white orange-blossoms and the veil of floating lace. He ground his teeth as he pointed to the mirror, and said scornfully : “ Is that the face of a bride ? The flowers and the veil are there, but the face is that of a false woman on whom punishment has fallen. They are waiting below for the bride to come down among them ; she will come ; never fear but she will come,

but it will be in her coffin. I hear the horses trampling without; I saw the carriages from the place where I lurked, biding my time, a brave show! This is a finer wedding than ours, wife, in the dark chapel at Rathermines. But where are the black horses, and the tall plumes, and black velvet? Aurelia Winslow will need them when next she travels. Listen!"

The merry clang and clash of the wedding-bells came floating through the frosty air, and made that air tremble and quiver with the joyous sound. It was the most bitter mockery to the wretched woman whose espousals they announced, that even a madman's wild fancy could have devised, and it caused Aurelia a pang that not even the prospect of a violent death had done. Her lips, which had regained their natural red, blanched once more, and tears glistened in her eyes, but by a quick, impatient motion, she dashed them away.

"Listen! Do you not know what those are? They are the joy-bells of Holton church-tower ringing for a wedding—for the wedding of the heiress of the Hall to My Lord Lynn. But they do not know the bride's true name. It is not Aurelia Darcy; it is the name that she took when she swore, three years ago, in the chapel——"

He broke off quite abruptly, and said, in a hissing whisper, close to her ear, as she tried to shrink from him: "Do you know what I am going to do?"

And then there was a silence. She could see that his eyes flamed as he looked down upon her. She nerved herself for the worst.

"I am going to kill you."

She had known it, known it from the first; but it was terrible to hear it thus hissed into her ear, and she could not restrain herself from the imprudence of an effort to get freed from the fatal clutch; but the effort failed, for while

the hand that held her arm seemed to bury its fingers in the soft flesh, the other hand tightened on her neck, while the madman sneered at her puny attempt to shake him off. Breath is strength, and Aurelia could scarcely breathe under that deadly yet calculated pressure, and she would have fallen but for the support afforded her by the wall, against which she had been roughly thrust. The necklace that she wore snapped in that last struggle, and the large pearls rolled scattering over the floor, where torn lappets and scraps of blond were strewed beneath the madman's feet. But Winslow's grasp relaxed a little, and he seemed to listen.

"Hark!" he said; "I hear the voices of your guests. They are getting impatient; they cannot guess why you are so tardy. Your fine bridegroom is there too, no doubt, looking for you. He does not know that you have another husband, who is come from the grave to claim you. The young lord must wait, wait. Are you not punished, Aurelia Winslow?—justly, justly paid the wages of your craft and your crime. You made me suffer long agonies; now it is my turn to command, and your rank and your money are straws in the scale. And to think that friends are so near—so near; to think that a word, a scream might bring help—might bring succour, safety, life, long life! Why do you not call to your friends, false one, when a shriek would ensure all these?"

His face was writhed and distorted, and with his grinning teeth and glaring eyes, he seemed more like some wild beast, wounded and desperate, than a man. He shook and trembled as he stood, like one who was in the first convulsions of epilepsy, and for a moment a hope sprang up in Aurelia's despairing heart. She had seen him long ago wallowing, prostrate, under an attack of the constitutional malady, which, in his case, simulated or produced madness,

and should he succumb to a fit, even now she might escape. But though he shook like an ague-stricken wretch, Winslow did not fall, and, bending forward, he whispered in Aurelia's ear: "Listen! I love you still, in spite of hate and anger, in spite of the wreck that you have made of me, in spite of falsehood and cruelty. Wife, your existence is a living lie! Wife, you have doomed me to sorrow and scourged my brain with scorpions till it sank beneath the sting and the smart; but I have never been able to pluck out from my heart my old love for your wicked self; and that is why I am going to kill you: you shall not belong to any other man; but if I had not loved you, I should have despised you too much to——"

The sentence was never completed. At that very moment the rustling and sounds of footsteps, that for some time had been faintly audible on the landing-place without, grew louder, and then came a gentle tapping at the locked door, not of the blue room, but of Aurelia's bedroom. There was a pause. The handle was turned fruitlessly; the knocking was repeated more loudly. Aurelia felt that this knocking was her death-warrant. The bony fingers that encircled her throat tightened their hold; the grim, haggard face close to her own mowed and grinned at her in mockery; and she tried to scream, tried to battle for her life, but no sound passed her gasping lips. A blood-red cloud seemed to pass before her darkening eyes, and Winslow seemed a fiery shape towering above her, and then there was a roaring in her ears, and the blood-red cloud before her enfeebled eyes turned to black night, and she sank down, while still the clutch tightened, pitiless, and still the maniac exulted, maintaining his fierce grasp long after sight and sound and sensation were over for Aurelia Darcy.

The tapping at the door of the bed-chamber ceased; but there was a half-subdued murmur of voices, that gradually

swelled into a shrill chorus of alarm and wonder. Then the voices and the footsteps seemed to retire, and all was silence except the noise which the horses' feet made as they tossed their heads and champed the bit, pawing at the gravel of the drive.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BAD NEWS.

THE surgeon rode fast. His main hope had been to arrive at Hollingsley Court in time to tell his errand before Lord Lynn should leave home. Failing this, he might still hope to meet him on the way; but there was another road to Holton, not much longer, and supposed to make up in smoothness for its greater length, and Mr. Killick had some apprehension lest Aurelia's bridegroom-elect should have chosen this other route. He looked at his watch from time to time, and pushed on, whip and spur. Once, however, in spite of his hurry, he felt in a manner constrained to stop and breathe his horse for a moment. At a point about equi-distant between Beechborough and Hollingsley, a chaise-cart, in which sat two men in blue uniforms, was drawn up beside a gate, while in the adjoining field were several policemen with their staves drawn, accompanied by a number of farming-men armed with cudgels and hedge-stakes, and proceeding to advance in irregular order towards a wood that skirted the field.

"Why, Martin, what's all this?" asked the surgeon, recognising the taller of the two men in the chaise-cart, who wore a braided coat, and was indeed that very Superintendent Martin with whose name Game Dick had made free.

Mr. Martin touched his hard hat to the doctor. "Only

a caption, sir, but there's a large reward in the case. We got information that the party that fired at Miss Darcy was not drowned, but hiding hereabouts. The shepherd here saw a suspicious wild-looking chap with bare feet, and a handkerchief tied round his head instead of a cap, eating the raw turnips stored up for the sheep. He ran back into the wood, and the shepherd brought us word. So we are going to beat the wood, and catch him if we can. It was just after daybreak when he was seen, and he's had a start, I'm afraid; but we'll nab him presently. Hilloa! men, go quietly, will you, with no shouting and nonsense, and search the plantations one by one," cried the head of the police, getting out of his chaise-cart, and scrambling over the locked gate. The doctor rode on; his horse was muddy and spent when he dashed up to the grand Italian portico of Hollingsley Court, just in time to jump from the saddle, and catch Lord Lynn by the arm as he stepped into his carriage.

"Beg pardon, my lord; I have something to say—something you *must* hear, and I've ridden hard to say it," said the surgeon, looking ruefully at the heaving flanks and trembling legs of his poor nag.

Now Lord Lynn knew Mr. Killick, from having seen him when he attended Kitty Mainwaring after her accident on the day of the cub-hunt; but he was utterly unable to guess what possible concern of his that might be respecting which the country doctor was so anxious. He was perfectly affable by nature and habit, and under ordinary circumstances Mr. Killick would have been certain of a kind reception and a patient hearing; but he was behind time already, so he feared, and was eager to get to Beechborough, and there was some irritation in his voice as he made answer: "You must excuse me. I cannot spare even a few minutes to-day, whatever the business in question may be. Perhaps you will oblige me by writing,

or will speak to my agent ; I really cannot delay at present." And Lord Lynn tried to pass the surgeon, but the latter stood his ground resolutely.

" I want to do a painful duty as gently as I can manage it, but I'm not to be put off," said Mr. Killick. " What I have to say relates to Miss Darcy—to the lady to whom you are about to be married. It will prove—— "

" Hush, sir !" exclaimed Lord Lynn, who observed that the servants about the door were listening with greedy ears to what the doctor said ; " we will go into the house." And they went in.

When they were alone together in the breakfast-room, the door of which the young nobleman had hastily torn open, Mr. Killick saw how pale and panic-struck the owner of Hollingsley had suddenly become, and he felt some touch of compassion mingle with his dogged resolve to do what was honest. He guessed the bridegroom's thoughts. " No, no ; you quite mistake me. I am a messenger of evil, but not of such as you think. She is not ill ; to the best of my belief, no harm has befallen her."

Lord Lynn drew a deep breath, and the blood came back to his cheeks again, but there was something in the doctor's manner that impressed him, do what he would. " If Miss Darcy be in good health, as you assure me, why, then——" he began, but was bluntly interrupted.

" Look here, my lord," said the bluff doctor ; " you and I are strangers, and we don't occupy the same rank in life, and you may think that we can have nothing in common, except professionally. You are wrong ; I have come here at a thundering pace, risking my neck and foundering my nag, I believe, on purpose to do you a service ; not for your lordship's sake, mind you, but because I should have been a rogue if I had held my peace. You have heard, my lord, of my niece, Lydia Crawse ?"

" Yes ; I think so. I am sure I remember the name,"

said Lord Lynn, nervously examining his watch, and half maddened by the delay. The surgeon continued: "She and Miss Darcy were friends once—more than friends; they were accomplices——"

"Sir, if you dare!" the young man broke out, in a flush of anger and indignation, and advancing a step nearer to the sturdy surgeon, who coolly rejoined:

"If I dare to say a word against the lady whom your lordship has asked to be your wife, without having proofs to back my words, I give you leave to cut my tongue out. I have come from the bedside of my dead niece, bringing with me papers which it will be well that you should read before you go to church to marry such a——Look at that first."

Lord Lynn took the piece of folded paper that Mr. Killick held out to him, and unfolded it with hands that shook strangely with wrath and vague terror. He tried to read, but the characters seemed to dazzle him, and he groaned as he gave the paper back, and dropped into a chair. "I cannot read it," he said; "the room seems to swim. Doctor, I beg you will—will——"

"That I will read it? It goes against me, but I cannot refuse," said Mr. Killick, who was gradually getting agitated too, but he forced his voice to be firm. "This is a certificate of a marriage, solemnised according to the rites of the Holy Catholic Church—Rome they mean by that—in the chapel of Rathermines, on August the fourteenth, 1856, between——Can you bear it, my lord?" (For Lord Lynn had buried his face in his hands, and sat suffering tortures, evidently, at every word. He uttered no sound, but his nod of assent encouraged the surgeon to proceed.) "Between Edward Winslow and Aurelia Darcy, both holding the Catholic faith. It is in proper form, witnessed, dated, and signed by the officiating priest—the rascal's name was Hagan. The certificate alone, my lord,

would not be enough to convince you; but this narrative, or confession, if you please—in the handwriting of my poor niece, and the writing of which cost the poor wench her life—will tell you——”

“Give it me!” broke in Lord Lynn, snatching it rather than taking it from the doctor’s hand, and bending over the manuscript. Then, as suddenly, he started to his feet, and fixed his eyes with suspicion and dislike upon the bearer of the bad news. “How do I know that this is not a vile plot, after all, in which you and your niece and others have conspired to ruin an innocent lady! But yesterday, if any man had told me that Aurelia Darcy’s honour was not as spotless as truth itself——Beware, Mr. Killick, if you are deceiving me now.”

And Lord Lynn confronted the supposed traducer with such a look and gesture of rage as almost made the surgeon quail, stout-hearted as he was. He replied, however, in a manner that was not without dignity: “I can excuse whatever words fall from you in your present agitation. Read what lies before you. Remember the writing, like the certificate, comes to you from a dead woman, once the friend of Miss Darcy. Read first, and judge afterwards.”

And Lord Lynn did read the narrative in which Miss Crawse had set down the first portion of that chain of events which had terminated so fatally to herself and others. He read slowly, for his eyes grew dim and bewildered, and when he came to the end he rose, and mechanically refolded the thick mass of papers, staggering the while like a man who has received a death-wound. Presently he spoke in a low, broken voice: “She is dead, then, the writer of this?”

“She died three hours ago. Her limbs are hardly cold, poor, wretched thing; and my first act, as you see, has been to tell what must blacken her memory. But I should

have been a rogue else, though she was sister's child to my dear wife, and the shame and grief must be on us all."

"Thank you sir. Forgive my injustice to you. I feel that you have done right. The proofs are too complete. But I loved her—loved her so dearly!" and the great sob of agony seemed almost to tear the young man's breast, as his voice broke down utterly, and scalding tears sprang to his eyes as he turned his head away. He had faced death and wounds gaily, and as in sport, many a time, but never had the reality of suffering wrung his gallant heart as it did now. The stout old surgeon turned his head away, respecting the sorrow of which he had been the reluctant cause. There was a long pause, during which no word was said. Mr. Killick looked resolutely out of the window—the window that looked on the rose-garden, not that which faced the portico where the travelling-carriage, with its imperials, stood packed and ready, and the postilions, with white rosettes in honour of their lord's marriage, sat in their saddles waiting. After about twenty minutes had gone by thus, Lord Lynn put down the hands that hid his face. There were glistening traces of tears on his bold manly face, bronzed by hotter suns than England knows. His lips were quite white and compressed, and the veins on his forehead stood out like knotted cordage. Across that forehead was a scar made by a Russian officer's sword at Inkermann. It was generally a mere faint line, but now it was blue and clear, a long livid cicatrice, pale, amidst the rush of dark blood to the soldier's brow. The voice in which he spoke was very calm and stern.

"No one ought to be condemned as guilty, unheard, and, least of all, the girl whom a man loves more than his life—as I love her. There may be something—something to extenuate. We must go to Beechborough, Mr. Killick, you and I."

"You will—will not make any scene?" said the surgeon, wavering. He had an Englishman's horror of anything dramatic and public.

"Scene!" Lord Lynn said no more, but in less than two minutes Mr. Killick sat by his side in the carriage, and the order was given—"Drive for your lives—fast!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BREAKING DOWN THE DOOR.

THE company at Beechborough had grown sick and weary of waiting; they could not tell what to make of the strange delay, of the stranger non-appearance of either bride or bridegroom; and they grew gradually louder and less restrained in their comments on this singular forgetfulness.

"A runaway affair, after all: off to Gretna, eh? stolen fruit is sweetest—eh? Mrs. Blythe; eh? Gillies!" cried old Sir Joseph, shaking his purple cheeks with laughter, in which many joined. There were others, who, with a vulture's instinct, snuffed misfortune afar off, and tingled with a secret pleasure at the idea that *something* contrary to the regular order of things must have occurred. Some of the old maids present felt quite young again at the prospect of something delightful and shocking, to account for the absence of the chief performers. There were others, of a more practical turn, who contented themselves with cross-examining the maids, and especially Jennings, for Mademoiselle's Parisian shrugs and arched eyebrows rather repulsed them. But Jennings and the housekeeper could only say that they had been up twice, and had knocked at Miss Darcy's door without eliciting any response. That was all they knew. There was nothing to be seen through

the keyhole, either of the blue room or of the bed-chamber, for the key was in the lock, and turned downwards. Not a matron of the party could elicit more than that from the frightened Abigails, save only confused fears that their young mistress might be ill. Meanwhile, Mr. Darcy, puzzled, but not alarmed, went about among his guests, cracking feeble jokes, and disagreeing with the opinions of persons whom it was safe to snub, but every moment peering out of the corner of his eye for the first glimpse of Aurelia.

"Here he is—here he comes!" cried several eager voices at once, as a cloud of dust came rolling down the road, accompanying a travelling-carriage drawn by four galloping horses. On it came like a simoom.

"Something like a pace! My lord knocks his horse-flesh about as if his purse was a long one," remarked a shrewd old squire to the Honourable and Reverend Cyril Darcy, uncle to the bride; and indeed the panting horses, smoking with heat, and lathered with foam, were in pitiable case. But the horses were forgotten when Lord Lynn, with his brow dark with anger, flushed and breathless, came striding rapidly into the room, seeming rather to drag Mr. Killick after him, than to lean on the surgeon's arm. His eyes roved round the room in an instant. What they sought, was not there.

"Where is—where is Miss Darcy?" he said, and he did his best to speak calmly and in a common-place tone; but we conventional folks of the nineteenth century are quick to detect a tone that deviates by even the slightest inflection from the appropriate one; accordingly, people looked at each other; there was a hum of astonished comment; everybody glanced at Lord Lynn, and then at Mr. Darcy, who came up with extended hand, much oppressed by the weight of his new character of father-in-law, but still

dimly conscious that something was wrong. Lord Lynn, so strong and all-compelling is custom, took the offered hand, and found himself replying in common-place words to the common-place greeting of Mr. Darcy. If an Englishman were on his way to the scaffold, I believe he would still accept the proffered hand-shake of a friend, and answer the inquiry after his health with a muttered: "How are you?" But this deference paid to habit, Lord Lynn let George Darcy's hand fall out of his own hand, which was as hot as coal with the fever of his mental pain, and repeated the question: "Where is Miss Darcy?"

"I don't know. Oh yes; up-stairs, of course; not dressed yet. Somebody said so. Nothing wrong with—with yourself, Hastings, my boy?" said Mr. Darcy, trying to turn it off with a laugh; while Sir Joseph, still rubbing his fleshy hands together, drew near, the very type of genial stupidity, and said something about young ladies being privileged on such occasions, and about modern feminine dress in general, and then chuckled with harmless merriment.

"I wish to speak to her for one moment; pray manage it for me, Mr. Darcy," said Lord Lynn, trying to draw the owner of the Hall aside. But there is something contagious in excitement: and the sight of Mr. Killick, splashed, and muddy, and unshaven, and of the agitation which the bridegroom could not wholly conceal, coupled with Aurelia's absence, was more than the company could endure in silence. A hubbub of voices arose, some wondering what could possibly have occurred to detain the bride so long from the expectant assemblage; others regretting the impossibility of reaching Holton Church before twelve o'clock, even if the carriages were to be driven at full gallop; and several ominously protesting their hopes that nothing frightful had happened, or would happen, to cloud

the mirth of the wedding-day. Unheeding this babble of talk, Lord Lynn and the ready-witted surgeon went out into the hall, now full of servants whispering and shaking their heads, and interrogated the women who had twice applied in vain for admittance into the room where they had left Aurelia in the splendour of her bridal finery. They could say nothing but what they had said, except that the door was locked, and that the door of the blue room was locked too.

"Pooh! nonsense; I'll go myself. Nobody will do anything unless I take the trouble myself," blustered out Mr. Darcy, more frightened than he cared to own, and beginning to ascend the stairs. Twenty volunteers pressed forward directly, and mounted the stairs at their entertainer's heels, servants and guests mingled oddly together, a common impulse of curiosity magnetising all alike. The drawing-rooms began to be deserted, and the company poured out into the hall, talking eagerly, while a little ladylike scream here and there called attention to the delicacy of some one's nerves. The discipline of social rule was for the time relaxed. Something *must* be the matter.

"Keep back, pray, keep back, my lord. I pray that what I fear may not have come to pass, but do not you go up the first!" And the surgeon, with a grave, almost a solemn face, held Lord Lynn back as he hurried after the rest. The bridegroom-elect turned angrily round, but there was a serious pity in Mr. Killick's look that made his frown relax, as he whispered low: "What do you fear?" The surgeon's answer was guardedly spoken: "I fear—no use mincing matters—I fear the poor misguided girl may——"

The sentence was not ended, except by a glance, and that glance told Lord Lynn that Mr. Killick's dread was lest

Aurelia, in some fit of terror or remorseful despair, should have destroyed herself. The Guardsman turned pale and red by turns, and hesitated. Up-stairs, the voice of Mr. Darcy, calling aloud upon his daughter's name, and almost sobbing as he entreated her to answer him, was heard above the murmur of the crowd. The same idea that had entered the mind of Mr. Killick had suggested itself to other minds; that of the honest Squire of Stoke had been one of those to whom that terrible fancy had occurred; and as Lord Lynn, after a moment's pause, shook off the surgeon's restraining hand, he found Mr. Mainwaring's arm passed kindly through his own.

"Let some one else go in first. Take my advice, pray do," said the Squire; while, as Lord Lynn shook himself free from that friendly hold, a smaller and softer hand was lightly laid on his arm, and he started and saw Lucy's sad eyes looking up at him, beaming with unselfish pity and alarm. The pretty face was very grave and pale.

"Cousin—Hastings; stay, stay here. Do not go up, Pray, pray, spare yourself the sight if—if——"

"Keep back, Lynn, for the love of Heaven!" cried one of the guests, who had known the bridegroom from his childhood, and whose jovial voice was strangely harsh—it was the master of the hounds—as he bent over the oaken balustrade of the landing-place. "Don't let him come up, gentlemen, I beg you all. We shall soon know all about it. They are gone for a crowbar to open the door with."

Lord Lynn sprang forward, casting off the hands that tried to hold him back.

"Stand back, if you please. Let me pass. It is my place, my right, to know the first what has befallen her who——Don't treat me like a child or a madman, sir; let me force the door." And he made his way through the crowd, and soon reached the door of Aurelia's bed-chamber,

before which George Darcy knelt, weeping, and calling in piteous accents on his child, his darling, to come forth and cease to frighten her poor old father. The owner of Beechborough was quite unmanned by his alarm, and the whispers he had caught here and there had half distracted him. Lord Lynn recoiled a step, and threw himself against the door with a force that made it quiver and groan under the stroke. Again, and again, before any one had even time to remonstrate, he hurled himself, recklessly and with impatient fury, against the door; and at last the strong patent lock and seasoned wood began to give way. He heard the crackling of the splitting panels, and tore at them till his hands were scratched and bleeding, then set his shoulder to the door, and with one violent effort hurled it, shattered and rent away from its fastenings, from hinge and lock alike, into the room. Then he sprang in. The room was empty. The crowd flowed in after him. Some one noticed that the door that communicated with the dark passage and the back-stairs was gaping wide open, and a cry was instantly raised that Miss Darcy must have gone that way. Another of the seekers mentioned the blue room. The door between that and the bed-chamber was shut, but not locked. Lord Lynn tore it open. A shriek followed, wrung from many hearts, as the sight within was disclosed to view.

There, on the floor, bestrewed with torn scraps of lace, and jewels, and blossoms from the crushed bridal-wreath, lay the bride—Aurelia—dead. Dead, with her white face upturned, her hair loose, and the pearls and the sweet maiden coronal of orange-blooms still encircling her nobly-shaped head, while the long transparent white wedding-veil, ragged and disordered, streamed upon the ground. But that she was dead was but too evident. There was an expression of pain and distress, indelibly stamped, as it would seem,

on that awful rigid face—an expression that could not rob it of its beauty, but that seemed to throw a lurid light upon that cold, statuesque perfection of outline. The eyes were open; the lips were slightly parted; the glorious white arms were thrust out to their fullest stretch; and the small shapely hands were contracted and clenched, as if in the act of pushing away some irresistible adversary. The embroidered robe had been torn and trampled, and one shoulder, smooth and spotless as ivory, was visible through the dishevelled hair that hung about it. It was badly bruised, and so was the arm that belonged to it, and from which the bracelet had fallen, and lay broken on the floor. Two men threw themselves on their knees beside that insensible form—father and lover—Mr. Darcy and Lord Lynn. The former of these sobbed and wailed like a woman, now kissing his daughter's cold cheek, and adjuring her to speak, to live, not to leave him desolate in his forlorn old age; now querulously urging the surgeon, who had also knelt beside the corpse, to lend some aid.

“It is a fit, a swoon; she is ill, or has fallen and hurt herself; but she is not—I can't bear to say it, doctor—but give me comfort. O my lamb, my only child, and this her wedding-day! She ought to be so happy to-day! Speak, some one! Tell me she is alive. Doctor, I'll give you anything—a thousand, ten thousand pounds, if you'll save her!”

So the poor old man maundered on, ten years older in his wrinkled tear-stained face than the George Darcy whom his hangers-on knew and managed. Some men get to be old very much earlier than others; he was such a man. Never really young, he hovered on the verge of senility, and the first strong gust of grief was too much for him, and set him drivelling and whining, poor honest George. Lord Lynn, he who was to have married her, took up

Aurelia's head, reverently and fondly, as he kissed her cold lips, and hot tears trickled down from his eyes, soldier as he was, and fell like rain on the dear dead face.

"She was driven to this," he said, forgetting the many ears that were ready to drink in his words, any one's words; "she was driven to do what she did. But who—who——"

Mr. Killick answered from where he bent over the corpse: "No, no. This is no suicide. Murder.—For goodness' sake, get those women away."

For there were as many women as men in that fatal chamber, and screams, and faintings, and passionate cries, began to prevail; while the real mourners, those that had loved Aurelia, knelt pale and silent beside her. "Murder." The word had a terrible echo. It ran like wildfire down the corridor, through the throng packed on the broad oaken stairs, through the denser mass of human beings that swarmed in the hall, and so out to the motley crowd in the yard, and "Murder" was muttered by every stable-helper and weeding-boy and dairy-wench, and so the rumour spread fast and far over all the country. Mr. Killick sprang up, and cleared the room. Doctors are used to exercise authority in critical moments, and the ex-naval surgeon had dealt with rougher units of humanity than the Beechborough guests and servants. Soon, none were left, except the doctor, Lord Lynn, poor Mr. Darcy, and two women, one of whom was the housekeeper. The surgeon was himself very much shocked. He had seen another death that very day, and that death was linked with Aurelia's in his mind. But his professional strength of nerve supported him where the others failed. He pointed to Aurelia's neck, where a livid streak marred the delicate purity of the skin, white as alabaster.

"See! the marks of the murderer's fingers. They are

frightfully distinct. Some one who gained access——But nothing is stolen——here are pearls and brilliants lying on the floor, untouched. This is not a robber's work; it is more like what a madman——”

And then Mr. Killick stopped, for the father of the dead girl, his weak nature stirred to its depths by anguish, was almost sublime in his sorrow. He had pushed away Lord Lynn; he had taken the heavy helpless head, and laid it on his breast, and he was weeping, as he caressed the wan cheek, and talked on, fondly pleading that his child would come back to his love. For the time, George Darcy was not a reasonable being. Even Lord Lynn, himself fearfully agitated, knew that, and bowed before a sorrow greater than his own. After one or two vain attempts to soothe the grief of the poor old man, the Guardsman turned to the surgeon: “Murdered! but by whom? He who fired at her—that man—but he is dead.”

Mr. Killick shook his head. He remembered the man-hunt which he had seen in progress that morning. “It seems a judgment,” he murmured. “But, poor lady, the worst has happened, and she is in better hands, ay, and more merciful than ours, blind buzzards that we are. I believe that—that person is alive. The police were chasing him early to-day. He will prove to be the author of this foul work.”

And the search seemed to prove the truth of the surgeon's conjecture. That Aurelia had been strangled, admitted of no doubt—the purple dints of the murderer's cruel gripe appeared with damning plainness on the white throat. It was clear, too, that this was the deed of no robber. Pearls and diamonds lay scattered on the floor of the blue room. On the left arm of the bride's corpse was a pearl bracelet, and the rings she wore were untouched. The jewel-case on her dressing-table contained more than four

thousand pounds' worth of gems, including the diamonds that had belonged to her mother, Lady Maud. There was money, gold, and notes, in a porte-monnaie on a tray full of glittering gewgaws, but nothing had been disturbed. Manifestly no ruffian had committed this crime for the sake of gain. Vengeance or madness could alone have been the incentive to such an act. No doubt existed as to the means by which the assassin had gained ingress to the bride's room; the door leading to the back-stairs was open; a fragment of ribbon, evidently torn from the delicate wedding-dress, was found there; and the door of the lumber-room, in which the villain had probably lurked till a favourable moment should arrive, and the door giving access to the house from the disused stone stair on the outside, were both ajar. The latter door had been forced open, and the rotten wood had given way, the stiff bolt of the useless lock having been driven in, staple and all. In the garden, all trace ceased.

There was a great outcry and turmoil in and around Beechborough Hall that day. Horses were hastily saddled, some from a vague idea that some of the gentlemen might want them, others that grooms might race off, unbidden, to the police, to the coroner, to such of the magistrates as were not guests at the Hall. The carriages, long kept waiting, gradually carried off the company to their own homes. Excitement, sorrow, sympathy with the woe of others, were prevalent among the guests, and many women were hysterical or pale and faint, lying back in a corner of their broughams and chariots, while their husbands and brothers were more monosyllabic than before. The splendid breakfast stood untasted. The flowers bloomed with no one to praise them. The musicians huddled away their *mal à propos* instruments, and went away. There was much eating and drinking under the ill-omened roof of Beechborough that day, but it was entirely in the servants' hall, where a sort

of funeral-feast went grimly on. For the rest, the speeches were not made, the banquet was neglected, the sparkling wine left in its ice-pails unheeded; and for a long time the merry wedding-bells sent their joyful cadence pealing from Holton church-tower over hill and dale, and through every nook and corner of the Squire's house. The women who straightened Aurelia Darcy's limbs, and laid her on her bed, and closed her dead eyes, and covered her poor pallid beauty from human sight, heard the festive clangour of the bells come floating into the chamber of death, and they shuddered and stopped their ears, for even to their dull perceptions the mockery was a hideous one.

It was with difficulty that Mr. Darcy was removed to his own apartments, under the care of Dr. Gillies, who had taken his old patient under his especial charge. Mr. Killick, along with Lord Lynn and several gentlemen, had started on horseback in pursuit of the murderer. True, the latter had left no trace of the direction of his flight, but this time his escape appeared impossible. East, west, north, and south, the horsemen rode at full speed, beating the thickets, leaving no farm or cottage unvisited, and urging every man from the hamlets and lonely homesteads, for the inducement of a large reward, to leave work and home, and hunt the murderer down. The whole country-side was roused. Before the sun was low in the heavens on that winter's day, there were two hundred men, on foot or on horseback, ranging the woods and searching the fields, and word had been sent to every town, and telegraphed along every line of railway.

"Mad or not mad, we must surely lay hands on him before night," said Mr. Killick, as the chase went on.

But Lord Lynn, though the keenest in impelling others to join in the search, turned his horse's head, and rode sadly back to Beechborough. "I dare not trust myself,"

he said in the surgeon's ear ; " I should kill him if we met. And he has suffered sorely, poor wretch. Heaven forgive him !"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MAD OR NOT MAD.

WINSLOW was taken before sundown. He was found many miles from Beechborough, crouching under the gnarled boll of an oak-tree, and too weary to go further. His bare feet were cut and gashed by the flints of the road, and his dusty travel-stained garments told of the speed with which he had rushed away from the spot where the tragedy had been enacted. But he made no resistance, and when roughly seized and bound with ropes, was quite quiet, and spoke no word. He was presently, after no small quarrelling and commotion among his captors, all of whom feared to lose the reward, taken into custody by the police, and removed in a cart, handcuffed and under guard, to the county jail. He was too weak to walk. He did not evince fear by look or gesture. The blows and execrations of the farm-labourers who took him produced no more effect upon his dull impassive demeanour than did the dry formalism of the blue-coated constables, or the interrogation of the magistrate before whom he was taken that a warrant might be made out. He made no sign, and uttered no word, but submitted in all things to the will of those who were about him.

Of the murderer's guilt, there could be little doubt. A fragment of Aurelia's delicate bridal dress was found hanging to the buttons of the rough navvy's jacket that he wore. A knot of white satin ribbon remained clenched in

his right hand; it was taken from him with some difficulty, and the lad who espied him just beneath the oak-tree swore to having seen him kissing and fondling this morsel of torn finery, "like a fool." Other boys, men, and girls, at play or at work, had seen him rush past them as he wound his way, through lanes, across commons, along the dusty high-road, to the place where he fell, exhausted. He was tracked thus, from a point within a quarter of a mile of Beechborough, to the place where he was captured. But there was nothing whatever to prove his identity. Mr. Killick and Lord Lynn might guess him to be Edward Winslow, but they did not breathe their suspicions, and the conjectures of the rest were like arrows shot wide of the mark.

Persevering in his sullen or distempered silence, proof against the practised eloquence of prison-chaplain, prison-surgeon, governor and warder, and even of the great authorities irreverently dubbed "mad-doctors," and who came down express from London to pit their experience of a hundred thousand cases against the contumacy or apathy of a lunatic, this strange man was invincible. They could not frighten him, or coax him, or startle him into taking an interest in anything. Even the knot of ribbon that he had been caressing, when he was first found, given back to him at the advice of an astute London physician, proved an inert amulet. He looked at it, and coldly let it drop. They had to feed him, for he did not care to take his food. They—the keepers who came to supplement the efforts of the prison-warders—were used to refractory patients who fought and bit, and had to be drenched with soup and milk by the aid of a horn. But even they were puzzled, for this captive did not fight, did not struggle, was indifferent, and bore fasting or cramming with equally callous carelessness. He never answered word or look.

"Upon my word," said the oldest keeper, "I've been

thirty years employed at this game, but whether this one is shamming or not, I know no more than you do."

There were those who could have gratified the public curiosity, had they been so minded. Mrs. Kelly in Ireland, as well as certain other persons, lay and cleric, in and around Rathermine, could have thrown considerable light upon the matter. But Mrs. Kelly was entirely under the influence of her spiritual director, and that ecclesiastic agreed with Father John Dwyer, that in a case that offered a handle to the malice of the church's foes, silence was the best policy. The subordinate actors in that little illegal drama that had led to unexpected consequences were Irish peasants, devoted to their priests and secret associations, hostile to that suspected engine of Saxon tyranny, the Law, and loathing an "informer" as the blackest of criminals. Old Nanny Brown at the turnpike, her son Nicholas, and her granddaughter Sally, had it also in their power to make revelations. But Game Dick, their mercurial ally, was in duration, and in his absence they were reluctant to run risks. Neither the reputed witch nor her respectable son cared to submit themselves to the manipulation of a cross-examining barrister; and Sally, the only innocent one of the three, knew very little, and had too lively a fear that her surly uncle would execute his oft-repeated menace of "wringing her neck like a chicken's," to venture on telling that little. One other person, and one only, was able to prove that Aurelia had tampered with him for the purpose of getting the lurking stranger spirited away quietly, and as quietly immured. This was the physician, not a very reputable M.D., whose advertisement on the subject of receiving a "Mentally afflicted" or "Intemperate" boarder had caught Aurelia's eye, and who had snapped at her liberal offers of money with the proverbial recklessness of one who lived in

perpetual apprehension of Whitecross-street and the Insolvent Court.

This unscrupulous follower of Galen, Smithett by name, was indeed the first person to move in the affair; but as he moved cautiously, merely notifying to Mr. Darcy and Lord Lynn, through the medium of their country solicitors, that he, Jonathan Smithett, M.D., of Sandport-by-the-Sea, required compensation for expenses incurred, and loss of professional engagements, consequent on his understanding with Miss Darcy, little harm resulted. As soon as it was plain that Dr. Smithett could make damaging revelations, it was wisely determined to buy him off, but not exactly on his own terms; and the medical black-sheep gave up the originals of Aurelia's letters to him, receiving in exchange as much as served to transport him and his shabby Lares and Penates to Melbourne, where he receives a small annuity, the greater part of which goes in rum and honey-dew tobacco, on condition of holding his tongue. To Australia also, through the agency of the same solicitor, an astute lawyer, who had seen the tin boxes of deeds, bearing the honoured name of the Right Honourable Lord Lynn, so long ago as his grandfather's lifetime, the Browns and Game Dick were induced by golden arguments to proceed; and, indeed, the latter needed little persuading, having a sincere hankering after honest repute, in combination with the flesh-pots of Egypt, the larger proportion of which, he had quite brains enough to see, fell to the lot of people "on the square." He was one of those clever, lax rogues who are more easily converted on æsthetic than on ascetic principles, and was quite ready to wash his hands of thieving if he could but get well started in a land where, as he phrased it, a "fellow could have a chance." He got his chance in Australia, shed his old skin, and came out in a new cha-

racter, and is doing well, being right-hand man to a thriving tobacco and vine grower in Victoria. Nicholas, on the contrary, behaving as ill at the antipodes as elsewhere, has been thrice in jail at Melbourne, Sydney, and Adelaide, and is now a bushranger, with a fair prospect of a bullet or the gallows. His old mother died at Ballarat. Sally, at the age of sixteen, married a digger. She was last heard of in Gipps Land, and bids fair to be a lady in Melbourne, with India shawls and a Long Acre carriage, if her husband is as steady and lucky as he has hitherto proved.

Mr. Killick's discretion was worthy of all commendation. He bluntly and always averred that he desired to keep the secret for his wife's sake, since her niece's memory must be disgraced, should the whole sad story get wind. But he zealously and intelligently aided Lord Lynn in the melancholy task of preserving, at any cost, the good name of her to whom the praise or blame of men mattered so little now. In clearing away the broken scraps of evidence which threatened to start up and accuse Aurelia in her grave, the good surgeon vigorously seconded Lord Lynn's solicitor, and his help was the more precious as very little assistance could be rendered by Mr. Darcy. That gentleman, indeed, never thoroughly understood the nature of the dark secret that had, upas-like, overshadowed the brief life of his lost daughter. It was thought more kind not to show him the narrative that Miss Crawse had penned; and he was only given to understand, vaguely, that Aurelia had been unhappily implicated in some unfortunate transactions in Ireland, through which she had incurred the irrational resentment of the maniac to whose fury she at last fell a victim. George Darcy was not inquisitive on the subject. He had lost his child, and the loss had staggered him, and his mind had no room for more than the one absorbing sorrow, save only for a wrathful desire that Winslow should die by

the hands of the hangman, mad or sane, for the evil that he had done.

Aurelia's funeral was a sad and touching sight, crowded as the churchyard was by half the gentry of the shire, while a throng of humbler spectators stood outside the low wall over which the yew-trees towered black and dismal. But all heads were bared, and none spoke above their breath, or had aught but reverence in their hearts or looks, when the hearse, with its nodding ostrich-plumes, snowy-white, in honour to the maiden dead, halted at the wicket-gate and the coffin was slowly borne along the narrow gravel-path, flanked on both sides by the mossy headstones of those whose very monuments were crumbling, like the shrouded forms of those whose names they bore. The darkling procession moved on towards the low-browed arch of the church door. The door was open, the clergyman who was to have blessed Aurelia's marriage was waiting to read the burial-service over the clay-cold form that could scheme, and thrill, and suffer no more. As the chief mourner passed, looking very much aged and worn, and broken, and leaning heavily on the strong arm of the gallant young soldier who was to have been the dead girl's husband, and whose handsome face was stern in its sadness, the organ began to pour out its solemn dirge-like strains; and as the music floated out through the open doors of the church, the women present began to sob and murmur.

"Poor thing! poor thing! God be good to her, and she so young!" said one old crone in a red cloak, speaking in a piping feeble voice, and forgetting her eighty years of poverty and toil, and her white hairs and tottering limbs, and the cough that told how brief her own span of time was likely to be, and with tears in her wrinkled eyes as she felt kindly pity for the young life cut off in its bloom. No better epitaph, no better *In Memoriam* than this, could

have been written for Aurelia Darcy by all the poets and scholars in the world. Earth to earth, and dust to dust. The last words of the service that breathes hope along with its sorrow are spoken, and the earth has fallen rattling on the coffin-lid, and the stone covering of the chancel vault slides slowly back beneath the pressure of crowbar and lever, and Aurelia Darcy, with all her beauty and all her faults, is hidden away from men's eyes until the judgment-day.

The coroner and his jury, the magistrates, grand jurors, and the clerk of the peace, and the clerk of the arraigns, did their work in due course, and with trumpet-sound and escort of javelin-men, the scarlet and ermine robed majesty of the law entered Warwick, and Winslow's trial came on. Whispers had gone abroad of course. No vigilance can quite gag the myriad mouths of many-tongued Fame. Lord Lynn's singular agitation on the morning of the ill-omened wedding; Mr. Killick's furious ride across to Hollingsley, and his appearance uninvited at Beechborough; Aurelia's frequent drafts on her trustees and bankers for money, so much beyond the supposed requirements of a young lady: these and much more, blabbed by servants, friends, and neighbours, had reached even the London clubs, and had furnished the pith of mysterious paragraphs in the local and metropolitan papers. The newspaper reporters, scenting a scandal, came down in great force to Warwick, like vultures to a spoil; but there was no scandal, and the newspaper reporters were balked, and retired in dudgeon. The only man who could have spoken the whole truth, excepting Lord Lynn and Mr. Killick, was Winslow; and Winslow was silent.

Nameless they indicted him—nameless they put him to the bar—nameless they bade him plead. "How say you, prisoner—guilty or not guilty?" But the question was

repeated in vain; the prisoner's cold gaze wandered idly over the court, resting with equal indifference on judge, jury, counsel, and crowded spectators; and then he began to play with the rue and other herbs which an old-fashioned or superstitiously punctilious sheriff had laid on the edge of the dock, as in the times of seventeenth-century jail-fever, and laughed. Every one who heard that vacant grating laugh felt a chill of uncomfortable pity. Winslow would not plead. In the good old times, they would perhaps have pronounced him "mute of malice," and have pressed him to death under loads of iron and stone that would have crushed in his breast-bone more or less slowly. But as the *peine forte et dure* is not in fashion now, the plea of "Not Guilty" was recorded, the evidence all circumstantial, but sufficiently conclusive, was gone through, and the judge charged the jury in a short and temperate speech. The jury left the court to deliberate; in ten minutes they came back. Their verdict was a matter-of-course one, after the testimony of the medical experts, three-fourths of whom pronounced the prisoner mad—Not Guilty, on the ground of insanity. The judge wrote on his notes, and the clerk on the record, "to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure."

A week afterwards, Lord Lynn left England. He was going to try travel as a remedy for grief; to endeavour to forget his painful thoughts in the midst of hardship and toil; Egypt first, then Arabia, Persia, anywhere where a traveller must rough it, and make his way by wit and courage as well as by money, not, as with us, by money alone. Before he started for Trieste, he went up to Stoke Park, and took leave of his friends there. It was a long adieu he was wishing them, for his return to England was very uncertain. He had no heart for ambition now, and the smart of his recent loss was too sore and new for him to listen even to

the call of duty. Last of all, he held out his hand, half timidly, to Lucy. "God bless you, my dear young cousin," he said very humbly; "you have been very kind and good to me. Good-by, now, dear; I hope we part friends."

"Dear friends, Hastings!" said Lucy, smiling and keeping back her tears with that amazing well-bred stoicism that our ladies learn from their childhood. Then she watched him as he rode away from Stoke, for the last time, in his black mourning garb, and with his handsome bronzed face very much softened and saddened, and the reins slack, as if he took little heed to the pace his good horse might choose to select. And then Lucy came away from the window, with eyes that swam with tears, and laid herself down on her bed, and wept, oh, so bitterly and long. Should she never, never see him again, she thought, never, never!

And Mrs. Mainwaring, seeing the traces of sorrow about her daughter's pretty brown eyes, told the Squire that she was afraid Lucy would not easily get over that infatuation of hers about Lord Lynn, who was all very well, but might never come back again, who might marry abroad, or be killed by the Arabs, or be buried in a sand-storm, or something of that sort. The Squire only answered "Humph!" but he became very tender and considerate with his eldest daughter; and Kitty, who had no perception of her sister's sorrow, was more than half jealous of the preference that Lucy now seemed to receive from her father's unspoken sympathy.

Presently, people who study fashionable intelligence in those corners of the newspapers where it finds a niche, read with some interest that Lord Lynn had left England for a protracted tour in the East.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONCLUSION.

AFTER his daughter's burial, Beechborough Hall became hateful to poor George Darcy. He had never much liked the place, but now it seemed indissolubly to connect itself in his muddled mind with the deaths of wife, and son, and daughter; so he hated it, and would have sold it, and the acres appertaining to it, but for some dubious idea of the extreme anger with which his own parent, the late Mr. Hanks, would have received the news. Mr. Darcy had been an obedient son. He shrunk from any overt act of rebellion, anything that tough old Hanks would have called flying in his (Mr. Hanks's) face, even retrospectively. But if he did not formally abdicate his place among the landed gentry of England, and bring Beechborough to the hammer, he at least neglected all the cares of squiredom. No more magisterial duties; no more colloquies with bailiff, and steward, and woodsman; no more interest in the game that he did not understand, or in the hothouses that he did. The establishment at the Hall was reduced; the model farm was let; the horses were sold. Mr. Darcy felt a melancholy pleasure in dismantling the place where he had been so wretched, and began to save, without knowing what to do with the money.

He clung to Lord Lynn at first, and was disposed to regard the young nobleman with great affection, as being the only person, except himself, who had loved his dead child, and mourned her loss deeply; and he would willingly have made a will, transferring the reversion of Beechborough, and of all the money in funds, shares, and foreign securities, acquired by Hanks *père*, to the owner of Hollingsley, if the latter would but stop in England, and be as a son to

Aurelia's father. But Lord Lynn, though he had been wondrously kind, patient, and forbearing in his treatment of the childless parent, was not to be bribed into relinquishing his own schemes of travel; and Mr. Darcy was disappointed. He formed twenty resolutions: he would marry again; he would go abroad; he would try public life; he would go to Paris, and having been respectable all his life, would try if roaring suppers and lansquenets at thousand-franc stakes, and the noise and glitter of the French Babel, would relieve his mind of dull care. He would join some extreme religious sect, or some crotchety party of theorists, and forget his sorrows in speech-making, acrid sermons, and platform oratory. He did none of these things; he went up to London, where he has lived ever since, querulous, and disposed to twaddling and fault-finding, spending five-sixths of his time at his club. Many of the members know his history, and have a sort of pity for the poor, broken old fellow, who looks twenty years older than his real age. He contradicts everybody, not vigorously, but in a weak, shifty way; reads the papers slowly, looks with lacklustre eye out of the bow-window of the club, and saves the greater part of his income. Becchborough is shut up; with its neglected garden and general air of untidy desolation, it looks like a house in Chancery. On whom it will hereafter devolve by its master's posthumous bounty, no one—not even the solicitor, who draws, on an average, six contradictory wills or codicils for Mr. Darcy annually—has the least idea. There are some men to whom even misfortune cannot add anything like dignity, and George Darcy, *né* Hanks, is one of them.

Edward Winslow, the nameless patient, whose identity is only represented by a number that occupies a place in one column of the books of the institution, remains among the criminal lunatics in the asylum to which he was

removed, pursuant to instructions from the Home Office. The keepers there were at first inclined to regard him with suspicion, and were in the habit of setting traps for him, so as to lure him into betraying the sanity for which they gave him credit; but gradually that idea died out. That speechless, passive prisoner, docile as a child, but not to be roused, as other mild madmen were, to a child's interest in the occupations or amusements which humanity and wisdom have provided for the mentally diseased, slowly earned for himself a claim to be considered as no impostor. His health is failing, but he never complains, even by those inarticulate moans or whimpering cries that other inmates, whose speech is incoherent or unintelligible, so often utter. He is kindly used, but shows no gratitude, no hope, no fear. He is a man perishing, more shut out in spirit from other men than if he were some shipwrecked wretch on a barren sea-girt rock out of human reach. Only the most experienced of the inspecting physicians now entertains any doubts of his sanity, and he has been heard to speak thus: "I used to think No. 135 was counterfeiting madness, but if so, he must be more or less than man, to bear such a torture, self-imposed, rather than speak of the past. At any rate, the poor creature is not long for this world. I doubt if he will be alive, gentlemen, the next time my turn of inspection comes round."

Mrs. Mainwaring was not far wrong when she said that Lucy's attachment to her kinsman seemed likely to last. It burned on, faithful and true, like a steady lamp, in that pure, fond bosom, and was kept alive by letters that came, now and again, from far-off parts of the East, in Lord Lynn's well-known handwriting. At first, those letters were addressed to the Squire, and were short and awkward; then, after a while, they were sent to Mrs. Mainwaring, and in the course of time they grew more frequent, and

that lady deputed her eldest daughter to the office of her secretary, and bade her answer that last epistle of her cousin's, bearing the date of Shiraz, or Trebizond, or Bassora, and to be replied to, if at all, under cover to some native merchant or banker at some emporium of caravan-traffic. Then, when many months had rolled on, drying tears in many eyes, and healing wounds in many hearts, the letters to Mrs. Mainwaring began always to contain a shorter missive, which Lucy kept to herself, or the purport of which she only rendered in general terms, in answer to Kitty's mischievous teasing. One day, more than two years and a half after Aurelia's death, Lucy received a letter bearing the stamp of some European city, and the first words she read made her face glow scarlet with sudden pleasure; then tears fell from her eyes, and hid the paper from her sight, but they were tears of joy.

"He is coming home!" cried Kitty, clapping her hands; "I know he is coming home at last. How patient you have been, dear! Well, why shouldn't I say so?" added the young lady, who had newly "come out," but was as wild as in her schoolroom days, and protested against her mother's nods and frowns of reproof.

Kitty was right. Lord Lynn did come back; and six months after his return, there was a very quiet, happy wedding in Sockhurst Church, and Lucy Mainwaring was the sweet, trusting bride who knelt beside Lord Lynn at the altar, smiling through her tears, and pledged her faith to him with her whole heart, and mind, and soul, and received his faith, as honest, true, and tender, in life-long recompense for her abiding love.

THE END.

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